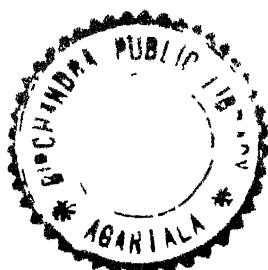


PREFACES TO SHAKESPEARE

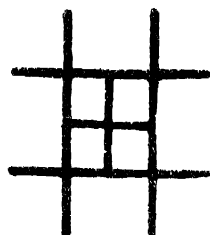
BY
HARLEY
GRANVILLE-BARKER

Third Series

HAMLET



LONDON: SIDGWICK & JACKSON, LTD.
44 MUSEUM STREET



Printed in Great Britain by Richard Clay & Co Ltd., Bungay, Suffolk

PREFACE

WHEN a preface so much outruns its subject-matter in length some apology may seem called for. I offer an explanation. I wanted, before I ended this series, to study one play thoroughly—as thoroughly, at least, as I could from the point of view I have adopted, which is to try to look at Shakespeare's dramatic art in the light of the effect which he, surmisedly, meant to make of it. Upon a score of more or less important questions concerning this we are still left surmising. But since the great Shakespearean scholars of the past thirty years—Pollard, Chambers, and their colleagues and disciples—brought knowledge of the Elizabethan scribes and printers, theatres and actors, into the admitted scope of the subject, it has become possible, with a little patience and care, and without too much exercise of the imagination, to visualise such a play as *Hamlet* in its native state; to do so by taking each scene, speech and exchange of dialogue, and deducing from their present cold print the effect they were meant to make in being. The task may perhaps need more than a little patience. There is that bygone stage to consider and its capacities, the actors and their methods, the listeners and their understanding—of which things Shakespeare was a judge, to which, as a good dramatist, he adjusted the technique of his work.

PREFACE

Its technique is, of course, but the secular part of it; yet until we can confidently appreciate this our judgment of the rest may always go astray.

I chose *Hamlet* for this experiment in thoroughness because it is both the best known of the plays and yet the one most subject to disputes. Some of my readers may, I fear, find it wearisome to be taken step by step through the text of a play they know so well. I pray their patience; and if they will grant me this they may find (as I did) that here and there they do not know it quite so well as they supposed.

No play has, in our time, attracted more criticism, nor—enlightening as this has often been—suffered more under it. For critic has come to criticising critic, and to setting one idea of the play's purport against another, until, beneath the conglomerate of their glosses, the play itself lies sadly obscured. But try to see it, first of all, as Shakespeare's public saw it, and many of the difficulties—which criticism, by neglecting to do this, has created—will disappear; while those that remain are mostly meant to be there, inherent as they are in the very nature of Hamlet's moral tragedy, his "madness." It is hard to bring this fresh eye to *Hamlet*; but that is what we must try to do.

But a play has two aspects: its aspect in action—this being how it is primarily and normally presented to us—and in the perspective of our recollection of it. While we are watching it, and yielding to the spell of its illusion, our appreciation of the characters will be dominantly emotional. In recollection—but the process may begin before the play is over—emotion yields to judgment; for

PREFACE

then we see them rounded and complete, and in a settled relation to the whole scheme of the play. The actor also must acquire this double view of a character; though he must consider it in its second aspect first, if he is, as he acts it, to develop it consistently, to relate its various phases one to another. I have tried to study the characters in both these aspects; but it is, of course, a 'Ring-and-the-Book' method, which involves a certain amount of repetition. For this I do apologise, I have done what I could to minimise it.

Lastly I have tried to set certain things in the play in what I think to be their relation to the general development of Shakespeare's art. For *Hamlet* is his masterpiece in this sense at least, that in it he fully 'finds himself'.

I have many debts to acknowledge; I can only record the chief ones. That to Professor Dover Wilson, and his recent exhaustive study of the play, will be evident upon page after page. And even when, finally, I have felt bound to differ from him, I am none the less grateful; indeed, I am the more so, for the very process of differing—and in private argument, one could have no more courteous, nor more helpful an opponent—has set me to study points which I might otherwise have missed. My debt to Dr. J. W. Mackail will not be so apparent upon the surface; but no one who has been happy enough to be brought into touch with his kindly wisdom will need to be told how deep a debt it is. I owe very special thanks to Dr. R. B. McKerrow and Mr. Frank Sidgwick; for their scholarly helpfulness, and (as my publishers) for their great patience. And I am in debt to other fellow-workers—Dr. G. B. Harrison,

PREFACE

Mr. Harold Child, Dr. W. J. Lawrence—I could make the list a long one.

I have worked with the Furnivall-Griggs facsimiles of Q₁ and Q₂, and with the Methuen facsimile of F₁. For a modern edition I have mostly used Dowden's volume in the 'Arden,' but not to abide strictly by it, either for text, or punctuation.

H. G.-B.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
Preface	V
THE NATURE OF THE PLAY	I
The Genius of the Workshop	I
The Development of Hamlet	10
THE NATURE OF THE ACTION	14
The Five Acts of the Editors	14
Place-Structure and Time-Structure	22
THEIR MOVEMENTS	35
I. To the Taking of the Oath	35
II. Delay; Frustration: the Departure to England	61
III. To Fulfilment and the End	134
A NOTE ON THE FIRST QUARTO	190
The Pirate and His Methods	190
The Changed Scene-Sequence	194
THE VERSE AND THE PROSE	203
Vocabulary and Imagery	203
The Prose	214
The Verse	216
THE CHARACTERS	241
Francisco and a few Functionaries	241
Horatio	243
Marcellus; Bernardo	244
Horatio, <i>resumed</i>	246

CONTENTS

THE CHARACTERS (*continued*)

	PAGE
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern	249
Polonius	253
Laertes	258
Ophelia	263
Claudius	269
Gertrude	282
Hamlet	290

THE NATURE OF THE PLAY

THE GENIUS OF THE WORKSHOP

FEW things throw more light on the nature of Shakespeare's art than does the fact that his masterpiece—not his greatest piece of work, perhaps, but the one in which he attains to a freedom and fullness of dramatic impression unknown before—should be the recasting, in all probability, of a ready-made play. 'Hamlet himself, it may be said, the most life-like and 'original' of his creations, was a ready-made character too; the conventional Elizabethan 'melancholy man.' His achievement was in the reconciling of these seeming contradictions. }

But he 'wanted art,' said Jonson; and Milton implied it; and Dryden, despite his admiration for him, felt bound to confess it. And if we mean, as Jonson and Dryden will have meant, a scheme of consistent principles and a studied method of expressing them, the Shakespeare of the greater plays lacks that most decidedly. There is an aspect of him which turns towards pure beauty of form, and the discipline and the limitations involved. It shows in the poems and in the earlier plays—in the exceptional homogeneity of *Richard II* and the graces of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—and we may divine it in his instructed love for the music of his time. Had he begun by writing plays to please himself, it is possible that the lyric poet in him would have prevailed. We can imagine him in Lyly's place, with schoolboys for

H A M L E T

his actors, delicate, docile instruments, to be taught their parts line by line; the result an etherealised semi-classic drama, of which Jonson could have approved without cavil. But he found himself instead learning his playwright's trade amid the comradely give-and-take of the common theatre workshop; and the result was very different. Let us cheerfully admit that he 'wanted art'; he was the genius of the workshop.

What he learnt there was to think directly in terms of the medium in which he worked; in the movement of the scene, in the humanity of the actors and their acting. Heroic acting, as Shakespeare found it, left the actor's identity with the character still not quite complete. It was comparable to those Japanese puppet-shows, in which the puppet, life-size and gorgeous, is handled by its black-suited showman in full view of the audience, who take pleasure in the patent skill of the handling. Tamburlaine was very much such a puppet. Allevyne himself wore the finery and went through the motions; but Marlowe had made the character something rather to be exhibited than acted. The trick of speech by which Tamburlaine and Zenocrate—Barabas, Hieronimo, Alphonsus and the rest—so often address themselves by name has its significance.

But the instinct of the actor is to identify himself with the character he plays, and this instinct Shakespeare the actor would naturally encourage Shakespeare the dramatist to gratify. The progress here is rapid. Richard III is still somewhat the magnificent puppet, yet the effect already will be less that of Burbage exhibiting the character than of Richard himself 'showing off.' The gain

THE NATURE OF THE PLAY

is great. With the actors forgetting themselves in their characters the spectators the more easily forget their own world for the world of the play. The illusion so created, we should note, is lodged in the actors and characters alone. Shakespeare's theatre does not lend itself to the visual illusion, which, by the aid of realistic scenery and lighting, seems physically to isolate them in that other world. But he can, helped by the ubiquity of his platform stage, preserve the intimacy which this sacrifices. His aim is to keep the actor, now identified with the character, in as close a relation to the spectators— as that by which the Clown, in his own right, exercises sway over them. It is not merely or mainly by being funny that the Clown captures and holds his audience, but by personal appeal, the intimacy set up, the persuading them that what he has to say is his own concern— and theirs. It is with the comic and semi-comic characters—from Angelica and Shylock to Falstaff—that we are first brought into this fellowship; and whatever conventions Shakespeare may discard, it will not be the revealing soliloquy and aside. (A large part of the technical achievement of Hamlet lies in the bringing home his intimate griefs so directly to us. In whatever actor's guise we see him he is Hamlet, yet the appeal is as genuine as if the man before us were making it in his own person.) But the actor does not lose himself in the character he plays. On the contrary. He not only presents it under his own aspect, he lends it his own emotions too, and he must re-pass the thought of which it is built through the sieve of his own mind. He dissects it and then reconstructs it in terms of his own

H A M L E T

personality. He realises himself in Hamlet. And if he did not his performance would be lifeless. The thing is as true of a Falstaff. If the humour is no more a part of the actor than the padding is, our laughter will be empty.

Shakespeare learnt the secret of this intimate and fruitful collaboration in the workshop of the theatre. And it is the dramatist's master-secret. He has to learn, for his part, just what sort of material to give to the actors of his characters; the nature, the quality, also the effective quantity of it, neither more nor less. If it is dialogue of little more substance than have the skeleton scenes of the *Commedia dell' Arte*—for a dramatist may have his characters fully imagined, and still leave them as inexpressive as they might be in real life—that will allow the actor too much initiative. Actors who are in themselves interesting, lively and resourceful can make a passingly brilliant effect with such material. But, like other fairy gold, it will be dead leaves in the morning. The records of the theatre are choked with such empty, perished plays. The dramatist must not, on the other hand, try to do for the actor what the actor can do as well, and better, for himself. It is waste of time—and nothing in the theatre is more precious—to construct a character complete in every detail, to dictate personal appearance (unless, as with Falstaff, there is dramatic capital in this) to elaborate habits and tricks and minor traits. A hint or so will suffice. The actor takes these things in his stride. It is even better to leave him to devise the incidentals of a character for himself. They will fit his personal presentment of it the more closely; there will be a gain in spontaneity

THE NATURE OF THE PLAY

and increase of illusion. Nor must the actor be burdened with matter, however fine, which does not give the character life, which he cannot convert to its self-expression. It was here that the University poets, with their contempt for the actor, were blind; and here 'literary dramatists,' in their ignorance of his art, are still likeliest to fail. The actor, to them, is a mouthpiece—the written word made more eloquent—for their poetry, their ideas. That they must put consideration of the character itself and the actor of it before this, that the character acquires a certain freedom, and the actor even a certain property in it, is a thing they find hard to understand, harder still to profit by. Yet actually to profit by this self-abnegation is what the dramatist must cunningly learn to do. To provide raw material for acting; is there something undignified about it? Shakespeare, in the theatre workshop, and an actor himself, will soon have been cured of that notion if ever he had it. The play as it leaves his hands is not a finished product, only its performance makes it that. Nor is it finished even then. Good actors never stereotype the playing of their parts, they keep them alive by continual little changes and developments. Shakespeare, in the same spirit, would re-touch and re-cast his plays. Had he not re-touched and re-cast other men's? That was the custom of the workshop. It could hardly result in perfection of form. But it made, both with dramatist and actor, for resourcefulness and flexibility, those needs of a crescent art. And the give-and-take of this continuing collaboration, the united force and the never-checked flow of it, did give free play to that sheer vitality, which,

H A M L E T

when all else is done, is the making of the drama, without which nothing avails.

Shakespeare learns to work in the living medium of the actors and their acting, the thing that is peculiar to the theatre; if the dramatist cannot work in it, clearly he is no dramatist at all. He soon sees, moreover, that it is the essential thing, which no pageantry must be let overshadow, nor mechanical tricks degrade. His progress is marked by a discarding of the artifices—presenters, dumb-shows, Latin tags, elaborate formulas of speech—which constrict its humanity; and, positively, by an ever increasing enrichment of the human character it is to paint for him. But there is no drastic change of method. The economy of the workshop forbids this. Also the human medium is not a passive one; actors will only do well what they know how to do and like to do. Shakespeare may add what he can to the dramatic commonwealth; he must see that he loses nothing of account, nor leaves any of his fellows in it impoverished. When he has provided the Clown with a Touchstone or a Feste, then—but only then—can he insist on his speaking no more than is set down for him. I doubt if the exiguous Peter of *Romeo and Juliet* could be so controlled; nor, it would seem, was it to the advantage of the entertainment that he should be. *Romeo and Juliet* abounds in artifices which are quite soon to be discarded; antiphonies, Euphuisms, volleys of puns. They stand incongruous now beside its vital dramatic poetry and forthright prose. But if the actors can make these inherited, still recognised conventions effective, and his own invention has momentarily failed him, the dramatist does

THE NATURE OF THE PLAY

well to furnish them. For the sustained effect upon the audience; that is the thing. And very certainly, here or elsewhere, he must sacrifice none of the power of the magnificent rhetoric, by which it is that Marlowe and those others have re-created this theatre he works for, by which the actors can so stir their audience, until he has found some means to that same end of even greater power.

•He comes to need this. There comes a time when the life in his poetry flags, when, beside Falstaff's humour, King Henry's rhetoric sounds hollow, when he turns to prose for Benedick and Beatrice, Rosalind and Orlando, and, with a tributary sigh for the dead shepherd, can allow Jaques his rhetoric.

Now, God be wi' you, in your talk in blank verse

What has happened? He is now a masterly creator of character. But the old rhetoric robs these creatures of flesh and blood of their reality. Yet while prose may suffice for comedy for pathos and the poignancy of tragedy it will not. Nor can he think of impoverishing the theatre and its actors by depriving them altogether of the enhancing magic of poetic speech. Moreover he is a poet, predominantly that; and poetry will out. What he needs is a poetic method by which to realise character.

The development to come is in some kind, inevitable. It follows from the identifying of actor and character, from the dramatist's sense that he is collaborating with the actor, and from the fact that the dramatist, in this case, was a poet who had learnt to think in terms of drama. He will

H A M L E T

keep the rhetoric for rhetorical purposes; his captains and kings will always have occasion for it. But, once the actor is realising the character, eloquent self-description becomes superfluous. With what, then, can his collaborator the dramatist best provide him, apart from what is called for by the sheer action of the play?—and this will be little; for the thing to be done in drama is better done than talked of, if the talk has no other end. With what can he best provide him for self-expression? It follows, if the actor can fulfil in himself the greater part of what we may call the ‘physics’ of the character, that the dramatist will devote himself more and more to its ‘metaphysics.’ And when the dramatist is such a poet as was Shakespeare, these ‘metaphysics’ will be of the kind with which poetry is most concerned, the world of the imagination and the things of the spirit; they will, it is not too fantastic to say, begin to give the character something very like an immortal soul. This is the development which leads him to Hamlet.

It involves no fresh departure. He has realised character in poetry before now; in *old Angelica*, in *Hotspur* very notably. But there was little of the metaphysical in either of them; abounding unself-consciously in a perfect conceit of themselves, as boldly self-expressive as two children. It involves no drastic changes of poetic form. He is too skilled a craftsman now to be fettered by rule. When his verse is alive it is such a natural language to him that it seems spontaneously to fall into form. Much enrichment of its substance, that there will be; a fresh vocabulary needed, a dramatic syntax, a dynamic use both of the sense

THE NATURE OF THE PLAY

and sound of words. And there will be a devising of action and situations which carry their poetry in them, with, at most, an illuminating touch or so to replace the direct description of the earlier plays. For dramatic poetry is not primarily a matter of words, but of the poetic conception of character and action. Where before *Hamlet*, can we find such a 'setting' contrived as that for the first scene on the battlements? Compare it, for method and effect, with the tomb-scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, or the storm in *Julius Cæsar*, and this again with the storm scenes in *King Lear*.

The development may not affect the whole play. We do not need to know minor characters intimately. Some are simply the functionaries of the story. Shakespeare will not be calling upon the minor actors to do more than they know how to do, nor anything very different from what they have done so far. He must, on the other hand, see that these 'metaphysics' do not so rarely a dominant character as to rob it of the reality it has gained; he must not exchange the rhetorical for the merely abstract. His task now, in fact, is to give—the actor aiding him—to these creatures of his imagination, by a single means, both actuality and the larger and profounder life with which poetry can endow them. His plays never lack the actualities of action; and the practice of his theatre provides for its continuous flow. But the sublimer the poetry, the more intimate now, we shall find, may be its images; and he will salt the greatest dramatic occasions with familiar little touches. There is the balance secured. Why is *King Lear* so full of them? Because he must take particular care to make that primitive colossus humanly real to us.

HAMLET

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HAMLET

There is more than one tentative at Hamlet in earlier work. Facets of him show already in *Romeo* and *Richard II*; Jaques is the 'melancholy man' derided; and in *Brutus*, the sensitive philosopher misgivingly impelled to action, the likeness is distinct. Shakespeare could not have his way with *Brutus*. He had too much respect for Plutarch, and those stoic Romans are spiritual strangers to him. But here, clearly seen, if not yet fully felt, is the man whose tragedy is within him— and where else, if it can but be shown, does true tragedy lie? What he now needs is suppler material to work upon; and this he finds in the story and play of *Hamlet*. We can only guess at the changes he made, and how much of the *Hamlet* we have he found there. But, with the character already half-ripe in his mind, we can, I think, detect him developing it further out of the very obligations of the borrowed story. And a very remarkable process this is; a masterpiece in workshop economy did nothing more masterly come out of it.

In the older play there was apparently much ado about Hamlet's shamming madness. This was his protection while he plotted against the King; and it may have furnished incidents enough to fill up the time between the Ghost's first crying 'Revenge' and the final catastrophe, if there were 'whole . . . handfulls of tragical speeches' to be delivered besides. Shakespeare takes over this device. He could hardly have done otherwise. Hamlet without his madness would not have been Hamlet at all. But though it allows for an

THE NATURE OF THE PLAY

amusing passage or so with Polonius, some oracular talk with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and remains an effective ambush against the King, beyond this—if it is to be simple shamming—it must prove more hindrance than help. For how can he develop Hamlet's character if the man is to be continually behind a mask? There can be revealing soliloquies, of course; and the candour of the friendship with Horatio will be useful. But with the Queen, and with Ophelia; here also a Hamlet feelingly himself is needed. Nor can an artificially antic disposition support scenes of crisis, nor carry a tragedy of character to its consummation. So Shakespeare's Hamlet is impelled beyond simple shamming. Yet it cannot be into sheer inconsequent lunacy, for there is no making that dominate a play either. Is not this the origin of the alloy of sanity and insanity, pretence and reality, which we vainly try to resolve into its elements again?

Shakespeare does marvels with this Hamlet who is neither mad nor sane, both 'mad in craft' and 'punished with sore distraction'; the victim—as we all at some time feel we are—of the world's 'sane' view of his 'insane' perplexities; the man—as which of us has not been?—at war within himself; and a traveller, with that passport, into strange twilight regions of the soul. But he cannot, for all his skill, so assimilate character and story that no incongruities appear. For the two are of a different dramatic nature. To do this he would have had to re-cast the play's whole scheme. He will not let his Hamlet suffer; but the other characters and their share in the action inevitably must.

HAMLET

He never, I think, made this mistake again. In *Measure for Measure* he rather takes the opposite course; the characters, one and all, are constricted to the borrowed story. But since the Moor of Cinthio's excellent tale (a far likelier tale than Shakespeare's version of it) has none of the nobility with which he means to dower Othello, since in *Leir* and the old chronicle behind him there is none of the catastrophic grandeur which is to be the making of *Lear*, in each case the story is first re-moulded to the man, and the other characters are fitted to his support or opposing. This effective opposition of character to character is the strength of drama. It composes the structure in which Shakespeare's sense of form came, in the maturity of his art, chiefly to lie; for his theatre's freedom in space and time encourages him to manoeuvre the mere action as he will, to be an opportunist in that. This opposition and structure and strength is certainly lacking in *Hamlet*.

But the character of Hamlet suffers too. Is it not odd, when we are studying it, how many of its details will, without the keenest watchfulness, escape us, and that students should still dispute the significance of some of the most salient things about it? Ought we to be able to ask so many—quite intelligent—questions? It is partly, of course, that Hamlet himself is struggling amid obscurities and contradictions; and here is our genius of the workshop, as usual, not only adapting means to end, but end to means, and making capital out of shortcomings. And the result stands the test of performance, which was all he had to care about. But put the play—as the student has

THE NATURE OF THE PLAY

a right to—on the dissecting table, and the flaw, and I think the cause of it, are apparent. Shakespeare has not—paradox though this may seem—finally *dramatised* Hamlet. Here is the character, at which he has had more than one immature and fragmentary try, fully and vividly imagined at last—what character was ever more so? But he does not submit it to the final discipline which would make it an integral part of the play. He could do so by reducing it to an equality with the rest. Such limitation would bring clarity. But this is just what he now will not do. The play, when he has finished with it, may be a masterpiece of the workshop, but with Hamlet himself he is pioneering a new world of drama. Later he will learn how to shape and economise that to his theatre's needs. Meanwhile—and we may be thankful for it—no lesser considerations turn him back.

THE NATURE OF THE ACTION

THE FIVE ACTS OF THE EDITORS

The long-accepted division of the play into five acts is not, of course, authentic. Here, as with other plays, the editors of the Folio were bent upon giving their author this classic dignity; and, it may be, besides, that by 1623 theatrical practice had itself imposed this division upon such of his plays as were still being acted. In the private theatres it had commonly been the custom to divide plays into acts and to provide music for intervals. The practice of the public theatres is a matter of dispute. If they did observe act divisions--four of them--they are hardly likely to have done so more than formally unless or until they also had some entertaining means of filling the gaps.¹ It is possible that their practice changed, and this during Shakespeare's own lifetime. He certainly did not (except for one instance) think out his plays in five-act form; whatever the exigencies of its performance are to be, the play itself is an indivisible whole. It was the telling of a story; its shape would be dictated by the nature of the story and the need to make this dramatically effective. And that meant, among

¹ Or unless the strain upon the audience became too great. That might entail a definite pause or so for recovery; but hardly four pauses. The Elizabethans, moreover, could apparently support sieges from which their modern descendants shrink. Their sermons ran notably to length. While the plays could be acted through in two hours or a little longer, there would be no physical need for a pause.

THE NATURE OF THE ACTION

other things, that if there were to be breaks in its progress, one generally did better to minimise than to accentuate them; for the attention of an audience, once captured, must be held.

In the dividing up of *Hamlet* the Folio editors for some reason get no further than 'Actus Secundus';¹ and not till the 'Players' Quarto' of 1676, do we find an end made of their Act II. and a III. IV. V. That almost certainly represents the theatrical practice of the Restoration; but quite possibly it has an earlier origin in the performance of the play in private theatres about the date of the printing of the Folio. Rowe (who, for text, picks and chooses between Q2 and F1) adopts it, and later editors follow him.²

But, whatever its origin, it illustrates no consistent dramatic purpose on Shakespeare's part. It cannot but to some extent thwart his technique; and at one point—in the contriving of the end of a third act and a beginning for a fourth—the offence is patent and the cobbling of the clumsiest.³

¹ To be quite accurate, they mark its 'Scaena Secunda' and stop there. But scene division is another matter. This is implicit in the text, for it depends, customarily, upon the incidence of a cleared stage.

² It the more certainly represents Restoration theatrical practice that this Quarto (of Davenant's editing, presumably) marks passages 'to be omitted in representation,' which are not included in the Folio's abbreviation of Q2. It will still be a homage to classical tradition; but there is no doubt, I think, that, whatever had been done earlier, the Restoration theatre did observe the five-act division, either by formal or appreciable pauses in the performance.

³ Dr. Johnson comments severely on it, and other editors may note its ineptitude. But Dowden (for instance) only says in the introduction to the *Hamlet* volume of the Arden Shakespeare that 'the received division between III. and

H A M L E T

A unit of dramatic action for a first act—if there had to be one—was not hard to find; for the story, as Shakespeare tells it, carries us at a sustained stretch and upon a plainly indicated time-scheme to the Ghost's revelation and Hamlet's heartsick acceptance of his task. So definite an 'act' is this, on both counts, that an editor is tempted to set down as definitely at the end of it '*Some weeks pass.*'¹ Now Shakespeare certainly suggests in the next scene that time has been passing; a remark of Ophelia's several scenes later makes it, in fact, a calculable two months. But, to realise this, we should need, as the line is spoken, to connect it mentally with another line spoken by Hamlet almost as long before, and do a small sum in subtraction—which we certainly shall not do at that moment. No such exact impression, therefore, is meant to be made on us.

The divider ends his second act upon Hamlet's resolution to put Claudius to the test of the play. This is an important milestone in the story; the scene is sure to gain applause; and in the following scene, if we are listening carefully, we shall gather that between the two a night has passed. So here, for the act-divider, are excuses enough for a few minutes' halt. Hamlet will have

IV. is unfortunate,' taking for granted, apparently, that for some sort of five-act form Shakespeare himself was responsible. And while he records the pertinent variants in his *apparatus criticus*, he leaves them without comment. Of so little importance did this aspect of Shakespeare's stagecraft seem even to him.

¹ Dover Wilson does so in the new Cambridge Shakespeare. In *What Happens in Hamlet* (p. 94, note), however, he modifies the statement; and I find myself in agreement with him.

THE NATURE OF THE ACTION

wrought us to share in his excitement; we shall relieve our feelings by applauding; we shall be given time to adjust our recollection of what has passed and prepare for what is promised. It may well be that Shakespeare's own actors found they had to give their audience an occasional rest from the strain of attention to such a play as *Hamlet*; it would be a greater mental-plus-emotional strain than any earlier play had exacted. It may even be that, Shakespeare consenting, they picked on this juncture as the likeliest for the purpose hereabouts; he might even pick on it himself. Nevertheless, since he did not so plan the play, the halt and the pause betray his stagecraft. He is not apt to check the impulse of his action at an emotional crisis which only anticipates a sharper crisis still, but rather to find means to relax the tension, yet without so loosening it as to lose hold on his audience. And his dramatic intention here is plain. It is to carry us straight from the deadly intent of Hamlet's

The play 's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

to the sight of the puzzled King and Queen questioning the still equally puzzled Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but learning with relief—that the harmless pastime of a play is in hand!

it doth much content me
To hear him so inclin'd.
Good gentlemen, give him a fu ther edge,
And drive his purpose on to these delights.

says the unsuspecting Claudius. With the loss of the quick sequence of the scenes, the irony of this will be largely lost.

HAMLET

Further, not five minutes should elapse (there are fifty-five lines to speak) between that passionate soliloquy with its ringing and resolute end (the sound of it will be still in our ears) and the pessimism of

To be or not to be

This is one of a series of such contrasts, a capital feature in the presenting of the character. Here, too, the full effect will be lost if the continuity of the action is broken.

As to the passing of a night between the scenes; at a guess, Shakespeare did not think about the matter at all till he came to write the sentence in the second scene indicating that a night has passed. (Nor, even so, is this a certain sign that it has; the performance may have been impatiently hurried forward.) It was natural in the earlier scene for Hamlet to set the play for 'to-morrow night,' since he had to write the 'speech of some dozen or sixteen lines' to be inserted in it. But after the passionate

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I

what concerns Shakespeare is to see that the unavoidable anti-climax is at least given some antidote. Rosencrantz's reply to the Queen, the

certain players
have already order
This night to play before him.

provides this. It re-stimulates our interest. The exciting event we are expecting is already nearer. That is the dramatic worth of the statement; the chronology is incidental to it.

THE NATURE OF THE ACTION

For a halt and a pause at the end of what is known as the Closet scene there can, as we said, be no excuse whatever. By a very usual turn of Elizabethan technique one scene simply evolves into another when the characters pass from the inner stage (the Closet) to the outer (some ante-chamber or lobby).¹ And a change in the Folio—made by whatever hand—does but better Shakespeare's main intention, which plainly is to carry forward the action here with as little slackening as possible. It is the King who is driving it ahead; for his purpose is to rid himself of his enemy without delay. And the pulse of the play has never been more feverish, nor Hamlet more beside himself; and he knows he 'must to England.' If somehow or other hereabouts this now lengthy third act must be brought to an end, the act-divider has but to let pass another hundred and fifty lines—Hamlet by then will be gone, and Claudius gain a breathing space, and we can be allowed one too.

To complete the customary tale one has now only to find an end for the fourth and as likely a beginning for a fifth act. Our act-divider could hardly have done much better than he does. We

¹ Hamlet in madness hath Polonius slain,
And from his mother's closet hath he dragged him. . .

—the King tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; i.e. from some place other than this in which he now stands speaking. The Elizabethan imagination will have responded the more readily to this changing of place by passing from inner stage to outer since it answered to the disposition of the Elizabethan house, in which one passed, as a rule, directly from room to room, not by a corridor.

The various alternatives offered at this point by Q2 and the Folio are more fully discussed in the footnote to p. 120.

HAMLET

hear of Ophelia's death; there is finality in that. The ensnaring of Hamlet has been prepared against his promised return, so that the pause intervening will be an expectant one. And—since the last act is to begin with the grave-diggers—it will give the stage carpenters a good chance to open the grave-trap and make all ready. But, once again, Shakespeare's intentions (though here they may not be grossly thwarted) are falsified. The suspense between the news of Hamlet's return (brought first to Horatio, then to the King) and his actual appearance is fully provided for by the scenes which intervene. And a break in the action here can only weaken the effect of the apposition of the tragic fantasy of Ophelia's madness, the warped cunning of the King's plotting with Laertes, the lyric beauty of the tale of the girl's death on the one hand, and on the other the wholesome prose humour of the Clowns. Hamlet, when he arrives, is, by that colloquy in the graveyard, to point this contrast for us. The simple and the clever, the innocent and the guilty alike all come to the grave—to the plain prose of the grave. But how much more effective the pointing will be if we have also let Shakespeare realise the contrast for us, as he has planned to!

For our own convenience we may make pauses in the performance of the plays. Shakespeare himself had doubtless sometimes to show his audiences that consideration. If he did not at first, the growing length of his maturer work will surely have compelled him to. It would be both a sturdy and a spellbound crowd, indeed, that could—literally, as to about half of them—stand up to an uninterrupted performance of *Hamlet*,

THE NATURE OF THE ACTION

King Lear or *Antony and Cleopatra*. But he never ceased to conceive a play as a single organic whole, nor its action as a continuous progress—which a never-halted performance of the shorter *Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost* or *The Merchant of Venice* could quite well show it to be.¹ And to learn how to minimise our dramatic loss, if we must interrupt a performance here and there, the Procrustean editors should first be forgotten; then the play's natural structure will appear, and divisions can

¹ I believe this to be essentially true, but subject—as with so much else to be said about his work—to qualification and exception. Among the earlier plays, the exceptional length of *Richard III.* is puzzling; among the later, one seems to detect a positive effort to keep *Measure for Measure* and *Othello* within bounds. *Henry V.* is definitely divided into acts. *Romeo and Juliet* shows some rudiments of a division by choruses. *A Winter's Tale* is dramatically divided into two parts. It may be hazarded, perhaps, that Shakespeare was indifferent to external form, though as willing to experiment in it—as he was to take a popular subject for the making of a play, or to pay a passing compliment to Elizabeth or James. But he did most eagerly experiment in the expression of the dramatic ideas which possessed him.

Another point. In estimating the acting-time of a play one must always consider the nature of the subject and the method of the writing; mere line measurement can be deceptive. *A Comedy of Errors* and *Love's Labour's Lost* will move far more swiftly than *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*. Hamlet moves at very varying speeds; averaged out, the pace both of *Measure for Measure* and *Coriolanus* will probably be slower. It is likely, again, that any play would then have been acted at a quicker pace than it commonly is to-day. The verse, and even the prose, would be spoken quicker; first, because the art of speaking was the actor's primary achievement; secondly, because in that age of little reading and much public discourse audiences would be better listeners too.

Yet another. The quickest shifting of the simplest scenes will add, say, half an hour to a quite straightforward 'platform' performance of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

HAMLET

at least be made to conform, as far as possible, to that.¹

PLACE-STRUCTURE AND TIME-STRUCTURE

There is both a place-structure and a time-structure in *Hamlet*. The place-structure depends upon no exact localisation of scenes. The time-structure answers to no scheme of act division. But each has its dramatic import.

The action of *Hamlet* is concentrated at Elsinore; and this though there is much external interest, and the story abounds in journeys. As a rule in such a case, unless they are mere messengers, we travel with the travellers. But we do not see Laertes in Paris, nor, more surprisingly, Hamlet among the pirates; and the Norwegian affair is dealt with by hearsay till the play is two-thirds over. This is not done to economise time, or to leave space for more capital events. Scenes in Norway or Paris or aboard ship need be no longer than the talk of them, and Hamlet's discovery of the King's

¹ It is hard to wipe the five-act division clean from one's consciousness. Most modern editions insist on retaining it, with a bare reference, if that, to its unauthenticity. Dover Wilson, in the new Cambridge Shakespeare, relegates it to the margin. That is a gain; and it is no doubt hard to go further, since some system of reference from text to notes and from one edition to another is needed, and this is on all counts the most convenient. The thing is to remember, when one is considering the play æsthetically, that these acts—and sometimes the scenes—have no true existence. The student must constantly have this in mind, or he will find himself still thinking of the play in acts and scenes—and thinking wrong. And it is for this reason that I have—with some difficulty for myself; I hope less for my readers—avoided all reference to acts and numbered scenes in this Preface.

THE NATURE OF THE ACTION

plot against him is a capital event. Shakespeare is deliberately concentrating his action at Elsinore. When he does at last introduce Fortinbras he stretches probability to bring him and his army seemingly to its very suburbs; and, sooner than that Hamlet should carry the action abroad with him, Horatio is left behind there to keep him in our minds. On the other hand he still, by allusion, makes the most of this movement abroad which he does not represent; he even adds to our sense of it by such seemingly superfluous touches as tell us that Horatio has journeyed from Wittenberg, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been 'sent for'—and even the Players are travelling.

The double dramatic purpose is plain. Here is a tragedy of inaction; the centre of it is Hamlet, who is physically inactive too, has 'foregone all custom of exercises,' will not 'walk out of the air,' but only, book in hand, for 'four hours together, here in the lobby.' The concentration at Elsinore of all that happens enhances the impression of this inactivity, which is enhanced again by the sense also given us of the constant coming and going around Hamlet of the busier world without. The place itself, moreover, thus acquires a personality, and even develops a sort of sinister power; so that when at last Hamlet does depart from it (his duty still unfulfilled) and we are left with the conscience-sick Gertrude and the guilty King, the mad Ophelia, a Laertes set on his own revenge, among a

people muddled

Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers . . .

we almost seem to feel it, and the unpurged sin of it, summoning him back to his duty and his

H A M L E T

doom. Shakespeare has, in fact, here adopted something very like unity of place; upon no principle, but to gain a specific dramatic end.

He turns time to dramatic use also, ignores or remarks its passing, and uses clock or calendar or falsifies or neglects them just as it suits him.

The play opens upon the stroke of midnight, an ominous and 'dramatic' hour. The first scene is measured out to dawn and gains importance by that. In the second Hamlet's 'not two months dead' and 'within a month . . . ' give past events convincing definition, and his 'to-night . . . to-night . . . upon the platform twixt eleven and twelve' a specific imminence to what is to come. The second scene upon the platform is also definitely measured out from midnight to near dawn. This framing of the exordium to the tragedy within a precise two nights and a day gives a convincing life-likeness to the action, and sets its pulse beating rhythmically and arrestingly.¹

But now the conduct of the action changes, and

¹ It is perhaps worth remarking that, while the first scene upon the platform closes with Horatio's cheerfully beautiful

But look, the morn in russet mantle clad
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill. . . .

in the second, when the Ghost scents the morning air, we have.

The glow-worm shows the matin to be near
And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire. . . .

—and then no more, nothing of hopeful dawn or cheerful day at all. An audience may not consciously observe the difference. Shakespeare evidently did not attach much importance to it, and he had, of course, no means of giving it scenic effect. But the producer of to-day, with light at his command, may do well to indicate it.

THE NATURE OF THE ACTION

with this the treatment of time. Hamlet's resolution—we shall soon gather—has paled, his purpose has slackened. He passes hour upon hour pacing the lobbies, reading or lost in thought, oblivious apparently to time's passing, lapsed—he himself supplies the phrase later—'lapsed in time.' So Shakespeare also for a while tacitly ignores the calendar. When Polonius despatches Reynaldo we are not told whether Laertes has already reached Paris. Presumably he has, but the point is left vague. The Ambassadors return from their mission to Norway. They must, one would suppose, have been absent for some weeks; but again, we are not told. Why not insist at once that Hamlet has let a solid two months pass and made no move, instead of letting us learn it quite incidentally later? There is more than one reason for not doing so. If the fact is explicitly stated that two months separate this scene from the last, that breaks our sense of a continuity in the action; a thing not to be done if it can be avoided, for this sense of continuity helps to sustain illusion, and so to hold us attentive. An alternative would be to insert a scene or more dealing with occurrences during these two months, and thus bridge the gap in time. But a surplusage of incidental matter is also and always to be avoided. Polonius' talk to Reynaldo, Shakespeare feels, is relaxation and distraction enough; for with that scene only half-way through he returns to his main theme.

He could, however, circumvent such difficulties if he would. His capital reason for ignoring time hereabouts is that Hamlet is ignoring it, and he wants to attune the whole action—and us—to Hamlet's mood. He takes advantage of this passiv-

H A M L E T

ity; we learn to know our man, as it were, at leisure. Facet after facet of him is turned to us. Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are mirrors surrounding and reflecting him. His silence as he sits listening to the players— and we, as we listen, watch him— admits us to closer touch with him. And when, lest the tension of the action slacken too much in this atmosphere of timelessness, the clock must be re-started, a simple, incidental, phrase or two is made to serve.

It is not until later that Shakespeare, by a cunning little stroke, puts himself right—so to speak—with the past. *The Murder of Gonzago* is about to begin when Hamlet says to Ophelia:

Look you, how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within 's two hours.

to be answered

Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord

There is the calendar re-established, unostentatiously, and therefore with no forfeiting of illusion. Yet at that moment we are expectantly attentive, so every word will tell. And it is a stroke of character too. For here is Hamlet, himself so lately roused from his obliviousness, gibing at his mother for hers.

But the use of time for current effect has begun again, and very appropriately, with Hamlet's fresh impulse to action, and his decision, reached while he listens abstractedly to the Player's speech, to test the King's guilt:

we'll hear a play to-morrow. Dost thou hear me, old friend; can you play the Murder of Gonzago? . . . we'll na't to-morrow night.

THE NATURE OF THE ACTION

We do not yet know what is in his mind. But from this moment the pressure and pace of the play's action are to increase; and the brisk 'to-morrow' and 'to-morrow night' help give the initial impulse. The increase is progressive. In the next scene the play is no longer to be 'to-morrow' but 'to-night.' The King, a little later, adds to the pressure. When he has overheard Hamlet with Ophelia:

I have in quick determination

Thus set it down: he shall with speed to England

And this - still progressively - becomes, after the play-scene and the killing of Polonius:

The sun no sooner shall the mountains touch

But we will ship him hence. . . .

After the spell of timelessness, then, we have an exciting stretch of the action carried through in a demonstrated day and a night. But the time-measure is not in itself the important thing. It is only used to validate the dramatic speed, even as was timelessness to help slow the action down.

After this comes more ignoring of the calendar, though the dramatic purpose in doing so is somewhat different. The scene which follows Hamlet's departure opens with the news of Ophelia's madness. We are not told how much time has elapsed. For the moment the incidental signs are against any pronounced gap. Polonius has already been buried, but 'in hugger-mugger'; and Ophelia, whom we last saw smiling and suffering under Hamlet's torture, might well have lost her wits at the very news that her father had been killed, and that the man she loved had killed him. But suddenly Laertes appears in full-blown rebellion.

HAMLET

With this it is clear why the calendar has been ignored. Shakespeare has had to face the same sort of difficulty as before. Let him admit a definite gap in time, realistically required for the return of Laertes and the raising of the rebellion, and he must either break the seeming continuity of the action, or build a bridge of superfluous matter and slacken a tension already sufficiently slackened by the passing of the Fortinbras army and Hamlet's 'How all occasions . . .' soliloquy. So he takes a similar way out, ignoring incongruities, merely putting in the King's mouth the passing excuse that Laertes

is *in secret* come from France . . .
And wants not buzzers to infect his ear
With pestilent speeches of his father's death

--an excuse which would hardly bear consideration if we were allowed to consider it; but it is at this very instant that the tumult begins. And once again the technical manœuvring is turned to dramatic account. The surprise of Laertes' appearance, the very inadequacy and confusion of its explanation, and his prompt success, are in pertinent contrast to Hamlet's elaborate preparations --and his failure.¹

¹ Does this contriving, however, stand the test of performance? Personally I have always felt so far that it did not, that Laertes' appearance was a little too surprising, that the King's excuse only made the matter worse, that Shakespeare has, for once, been too slap-dash, in fact that the flawed illusion of the action is not restored till Ophelia reappears, and in the pathos of the sight of her the rebellion is forgotten both by us and by Laertes. But this is perhaps to be over-nice of apprehension; and such a performance as Shakespeare would stage might cover the weakness.

THE NATURE OF THE ACTION

Only with news of Hamlet do we revert to the calendar, and then with good reason. By setting a certain time for his return, the tension of the action is automatically increased. First, in the letter to Horatio, the past is bunt up:

Ere we were *two days* old at sea, a pirate of very war-like appointment gave us chase. .

Then, in a letter to the King:

To-morrow shall I beg leave to see your kingly eyes.¹

¹ There is another but not very noticeable piece of up-building of the past in the King's line to Laertes.

Two months since
Here was a gentleman of Normandy . . .

This with what follows implies that Laertes has been absent from Denmark for an appreciably longer time--and incidentally it falsifies the play's calculable calendar. But that is, of course--since, as listeners, we go by impressions, not calculation--no great matter, and the dramatic intention clearly is to give, by this passing touch, an added sense of solidity to the time-structure.

There is yet another to come, a more subtle and a far more effective one, in Hamlet's talk to the grave-diggers, in the passage about Yorick. Why does Shakespeare take the trouble, thus late in the day, to establish Hamlet's age so exactly? To counteract the impression of the youthful prince, which circumstances--his studentship at Wittenberg, Gertrude still in the hey-day of her blood, and, as played by a boy, her youthful appearance--will have made on us, and thus late in the day, because, with the great central mass of the play's thought and passion behind him, Hamlet is inevitably a maturer figure than was the morbid young rebel of its beginning.

But the immediate effect, though we probably receive it unconsciously, is more dramatically valuable even than this. The play is nearing its end, and it must be, we feel, a tragic end; we know of the plot against Hamlet, which he can hardly escape. And the casting back of his thoughts

H A M/L E T

With the resumption of the war between them is made imminent. The scene in the graveyard thus takes place on the morrow; and this is verified for us as it ends, by the King's whisper to Laertes:

Strengthen your patience in our *last night's* speech. . . .

The general effect produced—not, and it need not be, a very marked one—is of events moving steadily now, unhurriedly, according to plan; the deliberation of Hamlet's returning talk to the grave-diggers suggests this, and it accords with the King's cold-blooded plot and Laertes' resolution.

The calendar must again be ignored after the angry parting of Hamlet and Laertes over Ophelia's grave. If it were not, Shakespeare would either have to bring in superfluous matter and most probably slacken tension (which he will certainly not want to do so near the end of his play) or explain and excuse an indecently swift passing from a funeral to a fencing match. He inserts instead a solid wedge of the history of the King's treachery and the trick played on the wretched Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This sufficiently absorbs our attention, and dramatically separates the two incongruous events. It incidentally builds up the past still more solidly; and there is again a falsifying

— — — — —
to his birth, to his childhood, gives us the sense of a life approaching its term. He stands with the skull in his hands; it is thirty years since he was born, three and twenty since the dead jester used to carry him laughing on his back. To this complexion must he also come—how soon? The picture, and the tale of the years, will set flowing some such under-current of imagination in us; nothing more explicit, for we travel with Hamlet, not ahead of him. But this is typical of the true use that Shakespeare makes of time.

THE NATURE OF THE ACTION

hint of time elapsed in Horatio's comment that

It must be shortly known to him [Claudius] from England
What is the issue of the business there.

—which is to be justified when all is over by the actual arrival of the English ambassadors to announce that the

commandment is fulfilled,
That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

But this will simply be to give a sense of completeness to the action. Nothing is said or done to check its steady progress from the graveyard scene to the end; for that is the capital consideration involved.

It comes to this, I think. Shakespeare's true concern is with *tempo*, not time. He uses time as an auxiliary, and makes free with it, and with the calendar to make his use of it convincing.¹

When he came to playwriting, time, if it is true enough to say, was commonly being put to no dramatic use at all. A few passing references to 'to-night,' 'to-morrow,' or 'the other day' there might be; for the rest, a play's end would leave a vague impression that so many events must have asked a fair amount of time for their enacting. This was not freedom--though it might seem to be--but anarchy; and he soon saw that some scheme of time would strengthen a play's action

¹ Exceptionally the story itself (as with *The Merchant of Venice*) or a part of it (as in *Romeo and Juliet*) may depend upon a question of time. He must then give it attention for its own sake; but he will manage to keep it fairly malleable, and to make something of his habitual use of it, even so.

H A M L E T

and add to the illusion.¹ For the unlikeliest story can be made more convincing by supplying it with a date or so.

An accurately realistic time-scheme, with the clock of the action going tick by tick with the watches in our pockets—that the theatre can hardly be brought to accommodate. Few good stories can be made to pass in the two or three hours allowed for the acting of a play, still fewer if they must include striking and varied events. There are three main ways of dealing with the matter. Each belongs to a different sort of theatre and a different type of drama. There is the so-called 'classic' way. This may involve rather the ignoring than any plain falsifying of time. The drama accommodating it is apt to concentrate upon one capital event, the approaches to it elaborately prepared; and— with a master dramatist at work— motive after motive, trait after trait of character, will be 'unfolded like petals, till the heart of the matter is disclosed and the inevitable conclusion reached. There is the normal modern method of a suggested realism in 'time,' appropriate to a scenic theatre's realism of place.² This commonly goes with a selecting of various events to be presented, one (or it may be more) to an act, the gaps in time between them accounted for by the act divisions, the rest of the story relegated to hearsay and a sort of no-man's-land between the acts. Each act then becomes something of a play

¹ Which is not to say that he was the only dramatist who saw this.

² The ratio will not be exact; but, generally speaking, the less realism in scenic place the less sense of realism shall we expect in time.

THE NATURE OF THE ACTION

in itself as well as a part of one, the resulting whole a solid multiple structure, the economy of its technique akin to that of sound building, as thrifty and precise.

Lastly there is Shakespeare's freedom in time, which is the natural product of his stage's freedom in space, and which—coupled with this—permits him a panoramic display of his entire story if need be, and uninterrupted action. And, having brought time out of anarchy, he is not concerned to regulate his use of it very strictly. He adds it to his other freedoms. Moreover he may take the greater liberties with it, because, for his audience, in their own actual world, the sense of time is so uncertain.

In nothing are we more open to illusion and suggestion than in our sense of time. We live imaginative lives of our own to quite another measure than the calendar's; a year ago might be yesterday; to-morrow will be days in coming, and gone in an hour. The Elizabethan convention of freedom in space, which depended upon the planning of the theatre, shrank with each restrictive change in this and at last disappeared; but the dramatist may still exercise—in the most realistic surroundings—a discreet freedom in time. We readily welcome that fiction.¹

Study of Shakespeare's stagecraft has shown us how we wrong it by depriving the plays when we

¹ Shakespeare's treatment of time is most notable in *Othello*. There is the undisguised freedom of the scene of the landing at Cyprus, when three separate vessels come into sight, ride out the storm, make harbour and disembark their passengers within the undivided speaking space of 180 lines. There is the complex latent use of time throughout the rest of the play.

H A M L E T

present them of their freedom in space, by obstructing those swift, frictionless passages from here to there, or by defining whereabouts when he knew better than to define it. This freedom in time is also a part of his imaginative privilege. He makes his play a thing of movement, even as music is, and obedient to much the same laws; and the clock and the calendar are merely among the means by which this movement is made expressive.

For our convenience in performing the play, one or two stopping places can be found; there are two, at least, where the check and the pause will do little harm. For the purpose of this study, then, and as a hint to producers, I divide the play into three parts. But, as a reminder, 'movements' will perhaps be the better word to use for them. The first will carry us from the beginning to Hamlet's acceptance of his mission (it coincides with the first act of the editors); the second from Reynaldo's despatch to Hamlet's departure for England; the third from the news of Ophelia's madness to the end.

A FIRST MOVEMENT

IN the play's first four scenes ¹ (which by the compactness of their time-scheme and the synthesis of their events lend themselves besides to definition as an 'act') its action is fully set in train; the main current of it which Hamlet is to dominate, and the auxiliary action which Laertes will vitalise when, the play three parts through and Hamlet absent for a while, he returns from France—that also is prepared for now.

Horatio is brought to encounter the Ghost and we hear of the dangers that threaten Denmark.

The first scene of the four gives us the appearance and reappearance of the Ghost, the talk in the interval between Horatio, Marcellus and Bernardo about the already troubled times, and their final resolve to tell young Hamlet of the matter. For an opening and purely preparatory scene it is lengthy; but its contents are of unusual import. It lasts in imagined time, as we are definitely reminded, from midnight to dawn; and the sense of this adds to its importance. The passing of these hours is suggested when, after the quick give and take of the dialogue about the Ghost, Marcellus says:

Good now, sit down and tell me, he that knows
and they, all three, do sit down and relax; and there follows the smooth flow of Horatio's long narrative. But note how the danger (attendant

¹ Four scenes, not five. See p. 49.

H A M L E T

upon all narrative in drama) of too great a slackening of the tension is avoided. Nothing is said to show that the three men expect the Ghost's return, but *we* inevitably do. So while we listen we are also alert for this, and rather the more alert because the characters in the scene seem not to be. Incidentally, the narrative adds stature to the Ghost. It is the spirit not only of a King but of a renowned King that we have seen :

our valiant Hamlet—

(For so this side of our known world esteemed him) . . .

Note besides that the Ghost's obstinate silence is a dramatic promise of speech later; and Horatio's last important line—that we may be left expectant of the scene to come—so interprets it :

This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him.

—to Hamlet. Also that Horatio and Bernardo are on a wrong scent in their explanations of the portent and are meant to set us on one too; so that when in the next scene Hamlet immediately fastens on the right one—not danger from abroad but some foul deed done here—that will be a surprise, a thing of some dramatic value always, and of double value in this case since the swift prevision will enhance him in our eyes.¹ Also that the tale of preparation for war, the sight of

this same strict and most observant watch . . .

while the spirit of the warrior king passes among the sentries, and even 'honest' Francisco, who has seen nothing, is 'sick at heart'—all this, so emphatically pictured, gives us a grim first impression of a Denmark demoralised and in

¹ An effect now lost by too great familiarity with the play.

A FIRST MOVEMENT

danger, its tried leader gone. Shakespeare cannot allow much space to the political background of his story; the more reason, then, that he should impress it upon us while our attention is fresh, and in its sternest reality. This picture will be quickly succeeded by its contrast and complement, a sight of the Court under King Claudius, the man of words, the diplomatist, the voluptuary, surrounded by acquiescent councillors; in which 'setting the greater part of the action is to pass.' But the play begins martially, and so ends, with

The soldiers' music and the rites of war . . .

and there is the half-removed passing of Fortinbras and his army rather more than half-way through it; another set-off to the continuing picture of the brilliant and debased Court

Finally, the scene's lengthiness is counteracted by the simple fact that

'Tis bitter cold.

—for thus it must be briskly played.

¹ The train of the play's 'foreign policy,' though we have but occasional glimpses of it, is very consistently developed. Claudius's diplomacy diverts Fortinbras and his 'lawless resolute' towards Poland for the time being. But having done well there, the young conqueror calls, all uninvited, at Elsinore on his way back. Hamlet, he says

was likely, had he been put on

To have proved most royally.

But as to King Claudius, though he did not lack personal courage, the inference throughout the play is that he was nothing of a fighter. And it looks—and the actor can make it look—as if, had Fortinbras found him alive, the

I have some rights of memory in this kingdom

Which now to claim my vengeance doth invite me . . .

might still have been spoken, but to more truculent purpose.

H A M L E T

Claudius, the new King, and Queen Gertrude hold their first Council. Laertes is granted leave to return to France, Hamlet refused it for his return to Wittenberg. We learn of the shame and grief with which his mother's re-marriage fills him; he learns of the appearance of the Ghost.

The second scene is launched upon a veritable shock of contrast. A flourish of trumpets; and the King and Queen come in state to preside at Council.¹ The King makes a brilliant figure—the ‘very, very peacock’ of Hamlet’s later gibe—and the Courtiers, happily released from their recent mourning, would respectfully ape his fashion. In every aspect he is a contrast to that gaunt apparition of armoured royalty, which we have just seen stalking the night.

There is but one blot on the splendour; Hamlet himself in his ‘nighted colour.’ But we do not yet know who this is that so jars upon the general contentment. We are to listen to the King, addressing his Council, dispatching one

¹ Q2’s stage direction definitely gives us ‘Counsaille,’ and the proceedings are like those of a Privy Council meeting; and there should be no need to argue the matter except that the Folio stage direction adds Ophelia, and that theatrical practice has long falsified both the surroundings and dramatic purpose of the scene, has made vague and ineffective what Shakespeare made definite and significant. It is true that the Queen is there; but she is—and as if in explanation—referred to within the first ten lines as

The imperial jointress of this warlike state. . . .

This may not precisely mean that she is the Queen Mary to Claudius’ King William, but the impression conveyed is certainly that she has a right to be present. Dover Wilson strongly insists on this reading of the matter, and puts the case, I think, quite unanswerably.

A FIRST MOVEMENT

piece of business after another; and only by degrees will the significance of the incongruous, recalcitrant figure be made clear. The business flows smoothly on; and there could surely be no better judged conclusion to the mourning for our dear brother's death than appears in that 'wisest sorrow,' in discretion's victory over nature, nor seal more tactfully set upon the ambiguous business of his marriage (an affair of state, however, after all) than the avowal that he has contracted it

as 'twere with a defeated joy,
With one auspicious and one dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole . . .

—unless perhaps it may all sound a little too elaborate, smack too much of an apology. He becomes succinct enough about Fortinbras and with the ambassadors, and then quite affectionately gracious upon

And now, Laertes, what's the news with you?
You told us of some suit; what is't, Laertes?
You cannot speak of reason to the Dane,
And lose your voice. What would'st thou beg, Laertes,
That shall not be my offer, not thy asking . . .?

—the repeated name is almost a caress.¹

Finally—our curiosity having been well aroused by the delay—Claudius provides an answer to the question we have been asking, and joins the play's great issue by turning to that cryptic figure with a quiet

But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son.

¹ A point made by Mr. Harold Child.

There is no stage direction to tell us that Laertes retires after his suit has been granted. But he is not a member of the Council, so he probably should.

H A M L E T

From the first—and the actor of Claudius can easily show it—he will have resentfully noted this defiant mourning brought to a Council called for the attesting of his marriage: it is little short of an insult. The Prince's fellow Councillors will note it too, and be awaiting the inevitable royal rebuke. The subtle Claudius, however, first belittles the matter by ignoring it. And even now—though there is added provocation in the muttered

A little more than kin and less than kind.

(it is not mannerly when your Sovereign addresses you at the Council table to indulge in obscure comment)—he contents himself with a mild, if slightly ironic

How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

He is repaid by the tart

Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun.

—King, Queen and Court, the whole gaudy gathering lashed alike by the bitter jest. It is time for Gertrude to intervene:

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark . . .

But the best she can do is to drive her son into a defensive argument—which serves, incidentally, to give us our first glimpse of his metaphysical mind. And it is ironically significant that he who is so soon to be ravaged by doubt should begin with that scornfully positive

Seems, madam? Nay, it is I know not 'seems'. . . .

Claudius, expert himself at an argument, and still admirably calm and kindly, then delivers a

A FIRST MOVEMENT

veritable sermon, which both sets us questioning what sort of nature can be hidden beneath such banal piety, and shows—this is at once plain—that, clever as he may be, he quite misconstrues Hamlet, or he would not, surely, treat him in his sorrow to such frigidities as

For what we know must be, and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
Why should we, in our peevish opposition,
Take it to heart? Fie, 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd; whose common theme
Is death of fathers

or, very certainly, ask him for consolation to

think of us
As of a father; for let the world take note
You are the most immediate to our throne. . . .

Hamlet indeed, the sermon ended, makes no response at all, stays obstinately silent. Gertrude intervenes again, to beg him at the least to^o

stay with us; go not to Wittenberg.

She wins only a cold

I shall in all rev best obey you, madam.

Claudius promptly and diplomatically seizes upon this as

a loving and a fair reply

(which obviously it is not), declares that

This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet

(it is as obviously neither: he is a prisoner)

Sits smiling to my heart

(his own so ready smile a trifle forced as he says

HAMLET

it), and, with a little jovial bombast, breaks up the Council lest worse befall.

(This accounts for only 128 lines of the scene—and I have written as many more about them. But it is important to note how categorically, for a start, Shakespeare establishes the triangle of false relations, within which the action is framed. Claudius, presented to us at the height of his good fortune, married to his mistress (that scandalous spectre laid unrevealed) and confirmed in this as in his assumption of the crown by a complaisant Council, is naturally content that Hamlet should be his heir, genuinely ready, no doubt, to play the loving father to him. But his tactless tact, the mellifluous excess of speech, the smiling kindness overdone—such falseness shows that he feels his position to be false. By his concluding emphasis on the question of the succession he implies—he will prefer it to be thought that there is the secret, the 'is' as against the 'seems' of Hamlet's recalcitrance. Gertrude—as we learn later, knows better. It is, besides his father's death, her 'o'er-hasty marriage' that is the trouble; not that Claudius is on the throne, but that he sits there beside him; and the constraint of her intervention tells us that, with her on the throne too feels her position to be false. The pair still keep their secret—the adultery—to guard from Hamlet and the rest, and Claudius keeps a deadlier one from her. As to Hamlet; that incongruous sequence of the long silence, the curt phrases, and the lucid and elaborate apology will leave us wondering what can be to come from him.)

¹ Why—such relations are inevitably so strained between them—did Claudius not let Hamlet go back to Wittenberg? I think no modern audience asks the question (if only they

A FIRST MOVEMENT

(We have not long to wait. The Council over and the Court gone, the ash-grey surface of his calm breaks and seethes, on the instant, into the convulsive

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!¹

This is the first of the seven soliloquies by which we are brought into unimpeded contact with Hamlet's mind; an exceptional number, but Shakespeare has need of them all if he is to keep the secret instabilities of that mind an effective centre

— — —
would ask questions about this play they think they know so well, how much more they would enjoy it! but we, students, may, since here perhaps is one of those points which, as Dover Wilson says, Shakespeare left unstressed because he knew that his own audience would instinctively grasp them. No one, of course, could leave England to travel abroad without permission, and in Shakespeare Denmark the same laws apply. Eric, having his father's leave, may return to Paris, for he is a person of no political importance (though in that, as it turns out, Claudio is to prove wrong). But one does not let a discontented heir to the throne go abroad and out of reach, and the Elizabethan audience would well appreciate that behind the King's smiling

And we beseech you, lend your ear to remain
Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye
there lay a grave consideration

¹ Dover Wilson is ill for 'sullied', and he tries a more extended dramatic value in it than I fear I can. But the tripled emphasis of

melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew

does turn 'solid' flesh into alme too explicit an image whereas it both clarifies and enriches 'sullied'. On that ground (for one) the innovation may be counted dramatically preferable.

H A M L E T

of the action.¹ This one is turned to manifold use. It explains that oddly ambiguous attitude each toward other of King, Queen and Prince. It dates for us this marriage, made not a month since and within a month of the brother's, husband's, father's death.² It gives us, in its explosive mixture of anger and disgust, Hamlet's true mood of the moment. But beneath this shows something of the pith of his character too; a sensitive reverence for the beautiful and good (so, to him, was his father's marriage, and even as much as he yet knows of his mother's treason to it is treason to an ideal); his consciousness of his own weakness, in the casual

no more like my father
Than I to Hercules .

and in that final declension to

But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue
And in the trick of iteration of thought and phrase

¹ My father's spirit in arms
would make eight, but this is no more than a flourish for the finishing of an important scene. On the other hand, while he is not alone on the stage for

Now might I do it pat
that is a true soliloquy

² It can be assumed that the marriage has only just taken place, 'within a month,' that is to say, of the funeral which was itself delayed a little less than a month. But I think the intention is clearly otherwise. 'Within a month . . . she married' the past definite tense does not properly apply to yesterday or the day before. The importance of the point is that Hamlet is not here presented as a man suffering under a quite recent shock (we shall see the immediate effect upon him of a severer one later). He has been brooding over the miserable business for the best part of a month.

A FIRST MOVEMENT

there is already something of that flogging of the will which is to be so manifest later.)

The dramatist's business is with action and character in action, and it is not easy to indicate other traits of character than those which the action immediately quickens without resorting to reminiscence and description and similar enfeebling and dilatory devices. Yet it is important to do this; we need to know something of what a man would be under other circumstances if we are to appreciate his conduct under present ones. It is the more important with Hamlet, swayed as he is to be this way and that, to make what is constant in his disposition clear; and to do this too before the shock comes which will set him, in mind and emotions both, violently swaying, so that we may not lay even more to its account than should be laid.¹

(By contrast with the orderly business of the Council and the King's silky urbarities, this uprush of self-devouring, self-exhausting, purposeless passion is the more eloquent of Hamlet's helplessness and loneliness. And he has come, he feels, to the end of things.) Claudius is on the throne; the Council has 'freely' set a seal both on this and on the horrible business of his mother's marriage; affairs of state are going their wonted way again.

It is not nor it cannot come to good. . . .

--yet what can he do? At which zero point it is (we guessing already that here is not an end of things but the beginning) that he looks up to find

¹ But Shakespeare finds later some other less direct means of doing this: cf. pp. 307 *et seq.*

HAMLET

those three sober figures standing waiting his pleasure.¹

The march of the action is resumed. From here to its finish the pulse of the scene will beat quicker and quicker and ever more strongly. But it is to finish only upon suspense of purpose, expectation still, the incline of the climax not mounted very far; so the first steps must be restrained.

Shakespeare manages this by letting Hamlet draw Horatio from the others (who stay respectfully by the door) to stroll or stand with him, friendly arm through arm, while he questions and confides; and Horatio must await an opening to say what he has come to say.² But there is no undue slackening of tension or loss of tone; for Hamlet has gladdened at the sight of his friend, and the pulse of our own expectancy will be beating quickly enough while we wait for Horatio to begin. When, at last—with that deft

My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

Saw! Who?

My lord, the King your father. . . .

¹ Dover Wilson says that he does not recognise Horatio for the moment through the mist of his tears, and I feel sure this is right. Shakespeare's men fairly frequently break into passionate tears, 'unmanly drops' though they may be called. So did the Elizabethans in real life. So do Frenchmen still, without being ashamed of it. I am not sure about Italians and Spaniards. And I do not know when it first became 'the thing' for Englishmen not to cry.

² It is unthinkable that Hamlet would speak as he does of his mother's wedding in the hearing of Marcellus and Bernardo. But the conventional distances of the platform stage leave the two friends, if they are at the front of it, in perfect privacy. The two others do not approach till Horatio turns to them with

Upon the witness of these gentlemen. . . .

A FIRST MOVEMENT

—he does, there follows a stretch of verse dialogue, swift, vivid, simple, and close-knit, combining the actuality of prose with all that is needed of poetic power, done with a superlative ease, the finest thing, indeed, of its sort in the play, and perhaps in all Shakespeare. A four-voiced interchange; Horatio's exact and calm, Hamlet's ever tenser and keener, Marcellus' and Bernardo's ballast to the mounting excitement. This is let mount no higher than to

I will watch to-night;
Perchance 'twill walk again.
I warrant it will.
It is as mine my noble father's person
I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape
And bid me hold my peace. . . .¹

Then the three are dismissed, and the scene is wound up with four swift lines, which will suffice to keep the enkindled Hamlet vividly in our minds, and which give us (if we do not—as we should not—already know the play's story) the first hint of the truth:

I doubt some foul play. . . .

He is quick at a surmise; we shall find him later preternaturally so. And in the iterated 'foul deeds . . .' there is even a touch of gratifying anticipation.

Laertes departs after warning his sister against Hamlet, and Polonius orders her to see no more of him.

Between the resolve to confront the Ghost and the encounter itself comes a scene for Laertes,

¹ This piece of dialogue is more minutely analysed on pp. 235 *et seq.*

HAMLET

Ophelia and Polonius. Some scene interposed there must be, if the interval of time is to be bridged while the sense of continuity of action is sustained. But this is of capital use also. Laertes is to be long absent from the action, and his loving care for his sister should keep memory of him alive for us till his return. Nor could our first sight of her come at a more significant—a more ironically significant—juncture.

For Hamlet and the trifling of his favour,
Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,
A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting. . . .
 Perhaps he loves you now;
And now no soyl nor cautel doth besmirch
The virtue of his will; but you must fear,
His greatness weigh'd, his will is not his own. . . .
Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain
If with too credent ear you list his songs,
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmastered importunity.
Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister. . . .

This is how Laertes sees the danger; Polonius too. (Ophelia herself, wistfully protesting, only knows of the Hamlet—melancholy of late, it is true, since his father died—who is courtier, scholar, soldier, and has importuned her ‘with love in honourable fashion.’ But *we* have just seen into a man’s mind, poisoned already by brooding on his mother’s shame, and have left him prepared to learn worse things still. What will such as he have to do with love-making, honourable or other? He is to wreck her life indeed, but in far other fashion than father and brother fear.) Here is the dramatic value of the scene; of its sententious talk, of the cheerful picture of the three, so secure in fortune as they

A FIRST MOVEMENT

seem—only a little worldly wisdom needed to carry them still prosperously ahead. They lavish good advice on each other; but the dark machine is already moving, in which they are, all three, to be caught and broken.

Hamlet himself encounters the Ghost, learns of his mother's adultery with his uncle, and of how his father died.

Now follows the discovery of the murder.

We have here, of course, one scene, not two. The Folio (though its scene and act-division extend to beyond this point) marks no division after Horatio and Marcellus have followed Hamlet and the Ghost, even though there is the technical excuse of a cleared stage; nor does the Players Quarto, nor did Rowe.¹

¹ It filters in with Pope, Theobald and Warburton. But Pope is dividing his scenes 'classically,' not by location. Dover Wilson thinks that to this point the scene was meant to be played upon the upper stage (and that the first 'Ghost' scene should be played there too) the Ghost and Hamlet re-entering upon the lower stage as Horatio and Marcellus disappear above. I see several objections to this. The scenes are long and the space is cramped. The Ghost—unless he was to be hidden from the groundlings—would have to be 'on the top of' his interlocutors. In the first scene, moreover, Horatio and the others would themselves not be very visible when they sit down to talk politics unless they were to sit close to the balustrade; and from that position, though it is possible, it would not be effectively easy to see the Ghost. Generally speaking, I think the first scene is both too long and too important for the upper stage. Play this upon the lower, and it would be inappropriate to begin the second scene above.

HAMLET

What is involved? At such a critical juncture Shakespeare will not want the impetus of the action to be checked, as it will be if the integrity of the scene is broken even by a moment's clearing of the stage. But he must have Hamlet and the Ghost alone together; and Horatio and Marcellus can hardly be ordered off—'like children told to leave the room. The ghostly mystery will be heightened by that silently repeated beckoning, the terror increased by the disappearance of the Ghost, and Hamlet's disappearance after it. The conventional vagueness of place allows them to pass out, through (say) the doorway on the main stage to the right. This leaves Horatio and Marcellus to sustain the tension by their five swift lines; then, as they follow into the imagined darkness, the Ghost will re-enter (I think) upon the inner stage, Hamlet still following. And so both the integrity and intensity of the scene will be preserved. The technique of the matter is no more complex than that.

The scene is begun (as was the first scene) by a brisk, picturesque exchange, which sets us again (this time the more easily) in the midnight darkness and cold. Then Shakespeare unexpectedly changes the subject. We have in Q2

A flourish of trumpets and 2. peeces goes of.

and, for explanation, the verbal picture of the oblivious King, keeping wassail, drinking deep, reeling the 'swaggering up-spring' in comfortable warmth and light; a contrast heightening the effect of the cloaked, close-standing, nervously expectant three. But Q2 gives us, besides this, twenty-four lines from Hamlet about drunkenness

A FIRST MOVEMENT

in Denmark (or England) and the one inborn defect—

some vicious mole of nature . . .

or

the o'ergrowth of some complexion

Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason . . .

--which may damn a man's whole reputation.

One might think this superfluous stuff, and the Folio cuts it out.¹ But it has a definite dramatic purpose. Once again we are given a glimpse of the intrinsic Hamlet. Of whom is he thinking when he speaks of 'the o'ergrowth of some complexion' which can even break down 'the pales and forts of reason,' and of the one defect—

Being nature's livery or fortune's star . . .

—which may vitiate all other qualities in a man? Not of Claudius, certainly. Of whom but himself?—and the actor can show this well enough. As significant is the complex of parenthetical dialectic itself. Here already is the Hamlet who will think, not so 'precisely' as dispersedly upon whatever event. Here he is also, at this expectant moment, taking refuge, so to say, from its emotions in the labyrinth of his mind. What is to come will shake his sanity to its base; but already (we are thus shown) the fine nature is perilously overwrought.

There is, besides, the effect gained by the abstracting, with this detached talk, of all immediate emotion from the scene. Upon the dry vacuum

¹ Possibly, however, only because it would have offended Anne of Denmark, and because James' Court was none too sober a place.

HAMLET

thus created the Ghost's advent tells profoundly; and the impression made on Hamlet by the simple sight of his dead father, can, in the sudden silence that falls, be felt.

His mind's immediate response is one of self-defensive doubt:

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable . . .

—for long not to be wholly cleared away. But in the increasingly poignant music of the lines that follow sounds the response of Hamlet's heart; devoted surrender. Here also is something of the intrinsic man.

(Throughout the play Shakespeare makes much use of suspense. The story is, it might be said, one long essay in it; the single deed to be done, and to the last minute the doubt that it ever will be. And its incidental use is continual and various. We have had the suspense between the Ghost's first two appearances, the delay between the telling of the tale of them and this midnight; and now that the moment has come, we have this still obstinate silence. And when it is not suspense incidental to the action and imposed on him, there will be the checks, the delays, the zig-zags of thought and intention in Hamlet himself to hold us in suspense.)

Here it culminates in the deadlock of a physical struggle:

It waves me still.

Go on; I'll follow thee.

You shall not go, my lord.

Hold off your hands.

Be ruled; you shall not go.

A FIRST MOVEMENT

My fate cries out,
And makes each petty artery in this body
As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.
Still am I called! Unhand me, gentlemen;
By heaven I'll make a ghost of him that lets
me . . .

And (for a piece of technical skill) note how the coming short interval of absence has a bridge built for it in the continuity between the

Go on, I'll follow thee.

with which Hamlet and the Ghost disappear, and the

Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak, I'll go no farther.

of their reappearance. Hamlet thus still 'holds' the scene; until, after an empty moment, responding to the effortless

Mark me.

he surrenders it and himself, with that simple

I will.

The disclosure follows. There is remoteness in the level melody of the verse, and something of hypnosis too; but, to balance that, its clear syllabic articulation stimulates attention:

But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part
And each particular hair to stand on end
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine: . . .

HAMLET

—while, punctuating such passages, we have the hammer blows of

So art thou to revenge when thou shalt hear. . . .

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder. . . .

but know, thou noble youth,

The serpent that did sting thy father's life

Now wears his crown.

To the rest of the truth the approach is more devious; the tone is more rueful:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,

With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts—

O wicked wit and gifts that have the power

So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust

The will of my most seeming virtuous queen. . . .¹

The infamy of the adultery is stressed, and the physical foulness of the poison made vivid to us—so elaborately vivid that when, much later, there is talk of poisoning Hamlet himself, and when the Queen is dying from its effects, the picture should come before our eyes again. After which, but for the venement backwash of that

O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!

If thou hast nature in thee bear it not . . .

which itself subsides into the compassion of

Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive

Against thy mother aught . . .

the occult passion of the speech fades; till, with
the

Adieu, adieu, adieu! remember me.

the Ghost itself fades from our sight.²

¹ At which point Devrient the actor used to veil his face in his cloak. It is possible also for a Hamlet, taking his cue from 'adulterate,' to show that he has half expected and dreaded this, and the shame of it.

* 'Fades' is, I fear, an euphemism if one is thinking of Shakespeare's stage. At the Globe it is probable—though

A FIRST MOVEMENT

Hamlet is left as in some limbo, from which to struggle back to the certitudes of the world. He has not spoken since that

O my prophetic soul! my uncle!

was wrung out of him; he listened in silence to the tale of his mother's shame. Now, with an

O, all you host of heaven! O, earth! What else?
And shall I couple hell? O, fie! . . .

he emerges; 'recovers his senses' we cannot say—for that, it will appear, is just what he does not completely do. From this moment indeed until (after that critical night of the adventure of the play, the killing of Polonius and the grim hide-and-seek through the palace) it begins to seem, as he sets out on his journey in the morning, that the ill is purged, from now till then Hamlet is 'mad.' How mad, whether by a modern alienist's standard certifiably so—Shakespeare does not think in those

not certain—that the Ghost descended by a trap. But note that it did not so disappear in the first scene, when first it stalked away, or later when it

started like a guilty thing

Upon a fearful summons

and passed swiftly out, while the three men were hesitating whether to strike at it or no.

Shakespeare's object would partly be to provide differently for two superficially similar scenes. In the first the sudden crowing of the cock is the signal for a quick disappearance. Here

The glow-worm shows the matin to be near
And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire . . .

And, while there was nothing better to be done than lower the Ghost slowly out of sight, the lines would at least give some sense of a slow fading away.

HAMLET

terms. He uses the word as unprecisely as we still commonly do. Says Polonius,

To define true madness,
What is't but to be nothing else but mad?

Hamlet speaks of himself as mad ; half ironically, while he is under the spell ; when he is free of it, as having been

punished
With sore distraction

He is not ironical there. But he speaks in riddles. And this we may fairly accept as Shakespeare's conclusion too ; that the thing in itself is a riddle. He attempts no answer. Nor need he, since he is writing a play, not a pamphlet. All he has to do is to show us what madness amounts to in this particular case. (Hamlet will also pretend to be mad and the pretence and the reality will not easily be distinguished. That there is reality mixed with the pretence - so much is plain. The reality, and the riddle of it, is Shakespeare's addition to the old story and its pretence, and is the heaven which, lifting the character above the story's needs, gives the play its enduring significance.) For while few of us have murdered fathers to avenge and not so many adulterous mothers to shame us, there will be hardly a man in any audience to whom that word 'madness,' in some one of its meanings, has not at one time or another come dreadfully home.¹

¹ Madness, it is just worth remarking, is one of the minor issues in the close-neighbouring *Twelfth Night*. And the Clown asks Malvolio

But tell me true, are you not mad indeed ? or do you
but counterfeit ?

A FIRST MOVEMENT

The lifting of the supernatural spell releases Hamlet to violent physical excitement. His first clear thought :

And shall I couple hell? O, fie!

is a remorseful rejection of his doubts of the Ghost. It is 'a spirit of health' and not a 'goblin damned'; and, as if in atonement, he will, from the table of his memory

wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books . . .

all student scepticism, in fact, so-called philosophy, and such like 'baser matter.' He swears it.

It is significant that his next thought is not of Claudius' guilt, but his mother's:

O, most pernicious woman!

For there has been his wound, and it is widened now and deepened. And the more fully, vilely filled in picture of the pair of them, of her as the 'smiling' - the seductively smiling-- 'damned villain,' so convulses and shakes him that he the seemingly ridiculous remedy of setting upon the actual tables taken from his pocket

That one may smile and smile and be a villain.

But the simple steadying of the hand words does steady his mind.¹

There are all the signs of incipient his greeting to Horatio and Marcellus-- inconsequent cunning, the croak¹ of suspicion even of his friend, the a-

¹ A corrective very much, or Shakespeare's own experience, of 'whirling' thoughts to words on

HAMLET

to reproach, the taking refuge in a web of words. Here, half involuntary, is already the 'antic disposition,' a spontaneous lesson given to the still self-observant Hamlet in its putting on. The two feed suspicion in him, certainly, by their reluctance—natural though it is—to be sworn to silence under these unhallowed auspices. Then comes the yet more equivocal voice from the cellarage; to which he anticly answers rather as to a 'goblin damned' than any 'spirit of health,' as if in surrender to whatever the power may be, will it but serve him!—at the moment, to scare this oath from them. He secures it, if only in silence, and seals it with the regained reverence of

Rest, rest, perturbed spirit.

And in the simplicity and courtesy of

So, gentlemen,
With all my love I do commend me to you:
And what so poor a man as Hamlet is
May do, to express his love and friending to you,
God willing, shall not lack. . . .

Hamlet they know speaks again; in the gentle
too, of

Let us go in together,
Still your fingers on your lips, I pray . . .

sudden cry:

out of joint! O, cursed spite,
as born to set it right!

g day opening its new account
own now dedicate spirit will

+

Shakespeare does not end the

A FIRST MOVEMENT

scene upon this resonant rhymed couplet, but with a repeated, quiet,

Nay, come, let's go together.

—upon a Hamlet exhausted, in need almost of physical aid, in need of friendship; and this burden promises but to make him a lonelier man than ever.

Note.—Upon the question of the Ghost and upon the implication of this 'cellarage' business, what Professor Dover Wilson has to say should be carefully studied. Briefly it comes to this or something like it. These four men that encounter the Ghost might well—as representative Elizabethans—take very different views of it; and so would men like them in the audience. Marcellus and Bernardo seem simply to assume that it is, without doubt, the spirit of the King back from purgatory. That would be, incidentally, the old Catholic view. To the 'scholar' and 'philosopher' Horatio, it is—till he has seen it—a 'fantasy,' and, even after, may still be only an 'illusion.' But when it would lure Hamlet away, his scepticism is resolved into fear that it may be some demon in the King's guise. And this is the orthodox contemporary Protestant view of the matter. Hamlet is something of a 'philosopher' himself and is a student at Protestant Wittenberg. But he is more imaginative than the others, and, under the circumstances, more ready to believe. He does not, for a moment, think the Ghost a mere illusion. But he is torn between the two beliefs. When the Ghost is there he feels sure—despite his questionings—that it is the spirit of his father; when the experience is only a memory he thinks that it may have been a 'devil.' The point is that to Shakespeare's audience these doubts would seem quite natural. The whole matter would be a living—even a burning—question; and Dover Wilson insists, it is, until the play-scene proves proof enough, as much the Ghost that is on trial (credibility) as Claudius.

As to the 'cellarage' business: profiting by Wilson says, I yet venture to differ a little from his conclusions. This, roughly, is my reading of it. Horatio and Marcellus find Hamlet haunted. For their desire to know what is between

HAMLET

they must overmaster it as they may; and they are never to make known what they have seen. Has this spirit bewitched him? That would be their first question. The voice from the cellarage would increase their suspicions of this, for it obviously belongs rather to a 'goblin damned' than a 'spirit of health'; and his own conduct and response to it – the 'Art thou there, true-penny?' the '*Hu et ubique*,' the 'Well said, old mole!' – is the reverse of reassuring. Hamlet does not, I think (and as I say above), do all this quite deliberately. He is in such a state of nervous excitement that he instinctively plays up – as an actor would put it – to the fresh manifestation, and mischievously gives it an extra diabolic twist: it may scare them into keeping silence! For Horatio and Marcellus are very naturally unwilling to take the oath that he demands of them. Would it not be sacrilegious, even spiritually dangerous, to swear a solemn oath under such circumstances? They give their word they will divulge nothing. He asks them to swear it, and they promise further that 'in faith' they will not. Horatio procrastinatingly yields to the extent of a 'Propose the oath, my lord.' But they never do take the oath in words, though Hamlet may choose to assume – and I, his frenzy passing, this may content him – that they do so silently.

But the scene is a picture set before us, not a proposition argued. ¶ This is, roughly speaking, I suggest, the effect meant to be made. We are not asked to draw more exact conclusions.

I should perhaps here note my personal preference for two Q2 readings, which editors, for some reason, do not commonly adopt:

Hamlet Come hither, gentlemen,
 And lay your hands again upon my sword,
 Swear by my sword
 Never to speak of this that you have heard
host. Swear by his sword.

†—which stands in the place of the Folio's repetition
 'rd time of the simple 'Swear'—clearly will give,
 is meant to, an increased importance to the
 vice.

the third proposing of the oath, makes the
 word out of Hamlet's mouth altogether.
 'or more arresting effect than lies in the
 the Ghost of Hamlet's own 'Swear.'

A SECOND MOVEMENT

*P*OLONIUS sends Reynaldo to Paris with money for Laertes, and to spy upon his conduct there. Ophelia, much affrighted, relates how Hamlet has suddenly appeared in her closet – ‘mad for thy love,’ says Polonius, and goes, taking her with him, to tell the King.

The slightly relaxed tension of the last scene's ending is at once further and very sensibly relaxed by Polonius' prolix injunctions to Reynaldo, with which this scene begins, by such verbiage as

Look you sir

Inquire me first what Daneskers are in Paris,
And how, and I who, what means, and where they keep,
What company, at what expense, and finding,
By this encompassment and drift of question,
That they do know my son, come you more nearer
Than your particular demands will touch it.
Take you, as 'twere, some distant knowledge of him,
As thus

—and so on, for seventy lines and more.¹ The circumlocution and hair-splitting, and the fluency of the verse give us besides and vividly — Polonius himself, the tedious old wiseacre who meddles his way to his doom — a figure manifestly modified from that of the earlier scene,² with its terse dispensing of sound worldly wisdom. And the matter of the talk suggests to us that

¹ Nor, to Elizabethan understanding, would it be at all surprised to find Polonius' agent spy them. A very close watch was kept upon students abroad — and is, one may remark, European states, not too happy in their home, fearful of conspiracies hatched elsewhere — at

² Cf. p. 253

HAMLET

must have passed, since Laertes is in Paris and needs money.

But the key of the whole action is to be changed, transposed from the mystery and terror of those haunted battlements, the poignancy of Hamlet's grief and shame, to the rippling movement of a Court life now restored to its normal round. In this deceptive climate the tragedy will be becalmed for a while. It is upon such waters that Polonius confidently steers, with his

See you now :

Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth ;
And thus do we, of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out. . . .

Such will shortly be the sense of the King's bidding to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and something such the method of Hamlet's counterminings. Duplicity, manœuvring, ambush and trap, no one knowing how much the other knows ; that is the new 'phase. And it appropriately falls to Polonius to initiate it with the sending of his mean little embassy to spy upon his son. For he is to make himself the centre of its wiles, and to suffer, a type of its futility, at last.

Note one technical detail. Reynaldo is just off on his journey. These last-minute injunctions, ^{varied} ^{hastily} one on another, give the scene an ^{is}, which will compensate somewhat for its ^{of fibre}.
^{is} Reynaldo departs, Ophelia enters, dumb-
^{with} alarm. When she can speak we
th

as I was sewing in my closet,
with his doublet all unbraced,

A SECOND MOVEMENT

No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered and down-gyved to his ancle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking together,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors—he comes before me —

Polonius finishes the sentence for her :

Mad—for thy love!

and she fears it may be so.

Hamlet's conduct, here described, has been subject to various explanations, and much abstruse argument. But what is the impression the tale of it makes on us; now as we listen, and by the aid of what we remember, with a little allowance to be made also for what is to come, and to be seen or heard by the aid of what we shall then remember of this? Behind that complex of impressions we are not called upon to peer. And if by chance there is fuller explanation, the clue to it lodged a now lost in some earlier, discarded, version of play, it has no dramatic validity. 'If S' leaves the listener searching after the blunders. But I do not think he does.

We shall remember, as we listen, that had been courting Ophelia 'in } fashion,' but that Polonius, mistrusting her avoid him— as it happened, at when the Ghost's 'shattering revealing. And our yet more recent sight the Ghost's disappearance, looking

As if he had been loosed
To speak of horrors . .

will be vivid.

' Mad—for thy love. W

H A M L E T

but not the explanation; Polonius is plainly on the wrong track. And even the 'mad' will be qualified by recollection of that pointed

How strange or odd so'er I bear myself,
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on . . .

But this will be qualified aga'n by the descriptive

Long stayed he so;
At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
That it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being . . .

--for here is surely something more than 'antic'; and, 'affrighted' though the girl has been, she is evidently telling the truth. As to Hamlet, then, we shall be left puzzled. Is he still as frenzied as we have ourselves seen him to be, or only pretending to be so, or partly pretending to be so and

But what Shakespeare wants is just to puzzle us, to make us curious to see him again, and to prepare us to ask questions when we do see him; never, we shall still be left almost as

hardly do better, surely, than use the same purpose. Hearsay is necessary; not only for ourselves, Hamlet's conduct is left quite inexplicable. (The relation between the two meetings (which we shall see) and this interim sight of him is not clear. And this interim sight of him with his troubled eyes keeps our interest. For there is much in

A SECOND MOVEMENT

madness that is repellent and grotesque, and that side of Hamlet's is soon to be apparent. To Ophelia, moreover, he will very markedly reveal it; and his own undoubted suffering, here pictured to us, is something of a set-off to that, and to his later treatment of her.¹

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are set to work. The Ambassadors return from Norway. Polonius plans to prove that Hamlet is mad for the love of Ophelia. The Players arrive. Hamlet awakes from his lethargy and, for his part, plans to prove the King's guilt by showing him its reflection in the Murder of Gonzago.

The scene which follows is the play's longest, and it advances the action not a jot. But its dramatic significance lies just in this; in the casual (or so-seeming) encounters and the evasively irrelevant talk, diluted at last into topical gossip of theatrical affairs—the smallest of small beer!—silenced only to hear a strolling actor declaim an old-fashioned speech about the burning of Troy. It is a sustained preparation for that outburst of self-reproach:

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I! . . .

which, when it comes, is by how much the more effective for the delay! Not that Shakespeare lets the main threads of the action drop or neglects to weave in circumstance as well as character as he goes. There are no real irrelevances, little that is

¹ The modern playing of Hamlet is, as a rule, and by much, both too sane and too sentimental; and the indecency of some of his talk to Ophelia is lost on modern audiences. But I fancy that Burbage shirked neither the grotesque nor the brutal.

HAMLET

not somehow allusive, nothing quite empty of dramatic purpose.¹

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been sent for, and in haste:

The need we have to use you did provoke
Our hasty sending. Something have you heard
Of Hamlet's transformation. . . .

That 'hasty' suggests that some sudden mis-giving had seized the King, it arrests our attention and gives the scene an initial impetus; the second sentence tells us that it must be some little while since the 'transformation' began, and reinforces the impression of passing time already made on us in the scene before. For the rest, Claudius is as mellifluously charming as at our first sight of him. The young men are 'dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern'; and though he is in effect charging them to spy on their friend, it is with the best intent. There is a pleasant informality about the business, and he does not make too much of it.² On the other hand, if his talk of fatherly affection is to ring true, he must show himself sufficiently anxious—as he does a moment later with Polonius—to arrive at the 'head and source' of the trouble. But indeed he is so, if only to make quite sure that it comes nowhere near the one fatal source.

¹ Even the topical talk of the 'eyrie of children' is not. There, we are inclined to say, the illusion is broken altogether—though it is doubtful if for an Elizabethan audience the division between real and mimic world was so precisely drawn as that. But its dramatic effect is plain; the lowering of the emotional tension to as near zero point as may be.

² The customary presenting of the King and Queen on their thrones with the two kneeling before them is quite out of keeping.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

But first the returned Ambassadors must be received. This play of hidden struggle is never left for long without the counterpoise—by reference if no more—of the overt march of events; and against inaction here is set tidings of action elsewhere. This is the third reference made to Fortinbras and his affairs. Next we shall see him, but Hamlet and he will pass each other by. At last they will meet, the one living and the other dead.

This is an item too in the scene's cumulative suggestion of delay. And, the Ambassadors dismissed, there is the additional delay of Polonius' chatter, which is stressed for us by the Queen's impatience of it. And it is she—careless of the plotting to 'loose' Ophelia to him—who suddenly arrests it by her

But look, where sadly the poor wretch comes reading.

--for Hamlet has appeared. The madman, whom we last saw wrought to distraction, have heard of but a while since piteously suffering, comes quietly in

reading on a Booke

A surprising and fittingly enigmatic first sight of the Hamlet, whose tragedy has now sunk, we are to find, so deep in him, beyond even his own ken.

Polonius' unceremonious ejection of the King and Queen contrasts pleasantly with the obeisances of the ambassadors. Then he cooingly encounters the madman:

How does my good Lord Hamlet?

And Hamlet answers:

Well, God-a-mercy.

There could not be a more unaffected beginning.

H A M L E T

(Since drama is the presentation of character in action, the concentrating of a play's interest upon a man's inaction must give rise to difficulties. Action of some sort there must be; something must continually be happening, and the chief character must have a chief share in it. It must not be too passive a share, lest we lose interest in him. Then, to be illustrative of him, it must be futile or frustrate action. It must pertain to the play's main theme, lest we lose interest in that. Yet it must not trench on it to the point—in this case—of too plainly endangering Hamlet's secret. For once that is out he must act, and the play will either end, or his and its character must be changed. Why does Hamlet delay? Because if he did not, there would be no play. It is a true but an empty answer. For it blinds us to the achievement involved in making the very delay dramatic. To picture inaction in terms of action, and make it as interesting, asks skilful stagecraft.)

(Hamlet is now —so he says of himself later—sunk into apathy. Shock and strain have dulled his feelings and weakened the will they prompted; and in the background, excusing the weak will, is doubt.

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil . . . ¹

But such apathy of will only leaves the mind more active, nakedly sensitive, preternaturally clear. Moral restraint will be lacking, since that part

¹ This comes, we notice towards the end of the 'O what a rogue and peasant slave . . .' soliloquy, as a comparatively calm sequel to its passion. The implication is, I think, that, when he considers the matter coolly, he is genuinely uncertain, but that this is not the chief trouble. It is will that is lacking; he has lost for a while the will to believe.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

of the man is sick. And from the disequilibrium comes this 'madness'; the mind falls sick too, of a fever. So it is that dull and muddy-mettled as he feels, Hamlet is startlingly quick to suspect Polonius and his schemes, his schoolfellows' duplicity, Ophelia's innocent guile; quick, yet uncertain, for the unbalanced mind takes no bearings. He is as quick to retaliate, though his weapon is but the will-less man's 'Words, words, words'—which he despises, and himself for using it, and for being masterly in its use. And so at each encounter, after a little watchful fence, we find him taking the initiative and turning the talk to his own account; to some distraction from his misery, screening of his secret, or whetting of his almost blunted purpose; or he may let it lead him no matter whither, as long as it be away from this unmanageable world of facts and consequences. And thus Shakespeare manages to keep him—even upon the defensive—the moving spirit of a scene.

Polonius treats him as a harmless lunatic. He obligingly plays the part, mischievously salting his jargon with a few nuggets of the old wiseacre's own brand of wisdom, and sardonic approval of the worldly-wise paternal care which has kept Ophelia safe from his gallantries.

He greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as cordially as he greeted Horatio. But on the very instant he is chilled, his

Good lads, how do ye both?

being answered by the self-conscious artifice of Rosencrantz'

As the indifferent children of the earth.

H A M L E T

by Guildenstern's

Happy in that we are not over-happy,
On fortune's cap we are not the very button.

So he responds in kind :

Nor the soles of her shoe? . . .

Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her
favours?

—and the three chop logic and wit for a while as
clever young men will. But the sensitive mind
is quickly at work. Why have they so unexpectedly
appeared, these 'excellent good friends'?

They walk—they the snarers—into the simple
snare which he sets :

what have you, my good friends, deserved at
the hands of fortune that she sends you to prison hither?
Prison, my lord?
Denmark's a prison.

Upon his repetition of the word, Rosencrantz casts
his own bait :

Why then your ambition makes it one . . .

and Guildenstern harps on that 'ambition,' and
Rosencrantz yet again. Claudius did not need to
tell two supple young courtiers whereabouts to
seek for the disinherited Hamlet's secret.

He knows well enough now why they are here.
Let them but confess it, that will be some mitiga-
tion. But they shift and shuffle beneath his gaze ;
and even his appeal—

by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy
of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved
love, and by what more dear a better proposer could
charge you withal, be even and direct with me, whether
you were sent for or no.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

—barely wrings it out of them. But his means of defence are clear. He has only to speak the truth, though not all of it. Denmark is but such a prison as the world is. A minute since Polonius was asking him:

Will you walk out of the air, my lord?
Into my grave?

He wishes he could; there is all the liberty he longs for. He has only to paint them the world as he sees it:—

this goodly frame, the earth . . . a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours . . .

—and man as a worthless quintessence of dust, and they will report him merely mad. For so he must seem to their servile wisdom; and so perhaps he is, to see the world so, this merry, sensual, practical world, in which his uncle-father and aunt-mother carry it so triumphantly. But even in that world he is but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, he knows a hawk from a handsaw—and spies from friends.

Through all he says there is threaded the longing to be free from the corrupt realities of life; and he jumps to the subject of the players—incarnation of the unreal—with a kind of ironic delight.¹ Gossip about their momentous affairs eases the strain; here, with nothing more disquieting than this

¹ It is worth noting how, in the scene-sequence of Q1, this note of longing to escape is soured hereabouts far more intensely but also far more obviously by the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy. Cf. pp. 194 *et seq.*

HAMLET

between them, are the three boyhood friends again. And in a moment the pedant Polonius presents himself, the perfect butt. The players follow.

We note not the courtesy only, but the friendly warmth of his greeting:

You are welcome, masters; welcome, all. I am glad to see thee well. Welcome, good friends. O, my old friend!—why, thy face is vanced since I saw thee last; comest thou to beard me in Denmark? What, my young lady and mistress! . . . Masters, you are all welcome . . .

—and he loses himself forthwith in their mimic world.

This passage with the players crowns and completes the main dramatic purpose of the scene. An idle prince, indeed, who not only walks reading and musing by the hour together in the lobby, but will sit fastidiously exchanging with a player the recital of Æneas' tale to Dido! And a weakling, who can seek refuge from his own 'cue for passion' in facile pity for Hecuba! We shall learn in a moment that, even as he sat there listening, this stultifying self-picture was forming in his own mind. But Shakespeare has first painted it thus elaborately for us, and stressed the febrile talk with his friends, the mocking of Polonius, the keen interest in the petty politics of the theatre, the call for 'a passionate speech,' the contented surrender to its music, so that we may first begin to wonder when, if ever, the revulsion will come. Then, when it comes, we welcome it the more.

There is the seed of remorse in that demand for 'a passionate speech.' He is asking the actor—how far consciously?—to simulate for his amusement what he is incapable of feeling him-

A SECOND MOVEMENT

self. And the woes of Troy bring reminder of his own. The chord in him is quick to vibrate:

But who, O, who had seen the mobled queen . . .

Is it only the unusual epithet that makes him exclaim? Does he not see, in his mind's eye, as he repeats it, his mother, inuffled in her widow's weeds—yet how unlike Hecuba in her mourning? For the rest of the speech his passive silence should become (so to say) an active one, which will set us asking what fresh train of thought can be firing in his mind. There is a resolved calm, flickering with humour, in his parting with the players and Polonius; and in the

Follow him, friends, we'll hear a play to-morrow.

an intent, made more vivid in the oracular sequel:

Dost thou hear me, old friend! Can you "play *The Murder of Gonzago*" ? . . .

—for we have not heard that fatal word since father and son thrice exchanged it upon the battlements. He continues:

You could, for a need, study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in't . . .

—and has forgotten Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose ears are pricked to hear what is passing apart there with the player. He dismisses them impatiently, his mind now pregnant with its purpose. Then comes the

Now I am alone . . .

H A M L E T

Only a prince, constantly attended, can appreciate to the full the relief in that; Hamlet, moreover, knows that he is attended by spies. But, being alone, instead of pursuing his purpose, he abruptly plunges, we remark, into the self-reproach of

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I! . . .

Nor, till he has purged himself of all this disabling poison, can he come back upon his course again, set it with an

About, my brain! I have heard
That guilty creatures, sitting at a play . . .

'The soliloquy re-charges the action to the full with the emotion which has been so long lacking, and restores to us the Hamlet bent on his revenge. He sums up in it, besides, all the flaws and failings in him that have let him reach this point, time lapsed, and nothing done. It is a most inconclusive summing up, however; questions asked, and not answered; later to be asked again, and never plainly answered. And even were he heartless and a coward—which he certainly is not—and in yet deeper doubt, the cause of this strange impotence, we feel, would not be there. But what we ourselves have seen and heard of him (since that unexpected

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!

warned us of coming change) leaves us, in sum, with about this impression: of a nature whose spiritual integrity that supernatural mandate—like an electric current splitting a substance into

A SECOND MOVEMENT

its elements—has for the while quite wrecked, completing thus what misery and disillusion had begun. The faculties are dislocated and at war. Feeling, faith, intellect and will; each one is still alert, and only the more alert unfettered by the others, but too aware of the others for concord, and each is too critical of the others for the lending of mutual aid. Hamlet is now at odds, not merely with the ills of this world, but within himself, and cannot but be impotent so.

Finally, we should remark the means by which, despite the scene's distractions, the main theme of the action has been pursued and our interest in it kept alive. (When Claudius confides their delicate mission to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern there begins what one may call the counter-movement of the play, the King's against Hamlet; defensive at first, to turn offensive later.) Polonius joins in it unbidden; and, from then on, he, or the two young men, or all three of them together are there to keep a keen eye on their quarry, to note every gesture, with a keen ear for every phrase. Even while they listen to the player it is Hamlet they watch. His movement against the King may be at a standstill, but the King's against him is active if only in the eloquent presence of these three; and thus the necessary dramatic tension is sustained. Then, upon their dismissal, we are given the one arresting hint of ' . . . *The Murder of Gonzago* . . . a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines. . . . ' That is enough to hold us expectant through the self-reproachings of the soliloquy; until, towards its end, the hint is given substance, the plan revealed, our roused curiosity satisfied, and the offensive against the King is started again.

HAMLET

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report that Hamlet is about to distract himself—and amuse the Court—with the performance of a play. Ophelia is set in his way while the King and Polonius hide and watch. Hamlet discovers this, and suspects Ophelia of being a willing decoy. The King is satisfied that it is not love which has driven him mad, that indeed he is not mad at all.

The next scene opens at a sensibly lower pitch. But fresh impetus is given to the King's counter-movement by his appearance with the Queen, accompanied by all four instruments of its policy: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, already apter for their task and talking of 'crafty madness'; Polonius, who now yields initiative to the King; and Ophelia, docile, silent. The tension is keyed up a little too; first by the advancing of the prospect of the play to 'this night,' then by the imminence of Hamlet's approach. But Shakespeare delays this for an instant; to show us Ophelia and the Queen together, and to point the contrast between them, between the sensitive, innocent girl and the pretty, kindly, smirched, bedizened woman; also to let Polonius 'sugar o'er' his slight misgiving over this ambush they are setting, and the baiting of it, with an accustomed platitude (is he a little less ready since that 'Let her not walk i' the sun . . . ' to 'loose' his daughter to the madman?), which, in turn, provokes a revealing aside from the King. From now on, we need have no doubt of his guilt.¹ The two 'bestow' them-

¹ For some discussion of this, see p. 272.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

selves behind the arras. Ophelia¹ a sense of her walks apart, and Hamlet appears. sense of

Before his last quiet entrance, reading on a book, we had heard of him distractedly intruding upon Ophelia. But a few moments since we have seen him equally torn with emotion; and here he is, outwardly calm and self-contained as never before. It is a similar effect of contrast and surprise. But while that

The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

was wrought with passion, it was set in concentrated purpose too; and this succeeding calm is far from passionless, it is passion at a still, white heat, fused into thought

To be or not to be, that is the question. . . .

These unmodulated changes from storm to calm smack a little and are meant to—of 'madness.' But how the man's moral quality shows in the fact that he can thus escape from his suffering to this stoically detached contemplation of greater issues! Only towards the soliloquy's end with the

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action . . .

does its thought turn a point or so inward—to regain touch with the main trend of the action. Note besides the technical skill which, lodging this parenthesis of calm and seeming irrelevance before the nervous outbreak to come, has first made us

HAMLET

Ophelia there in the background, thus keeping us expectant, and the tension sustained.¹

The meeting, for its first few moments, passes as any such meeting may between two sensitive creatures sundered by no quarrel of their own; in reserve, in reproachful sorrow that they have let themselves be sundered, and a provoking of more misunderstanding by which to justify reproach. He may choose to think her

Good my lord,

How does your honour for this many a day?

a little uncandid, ignoring the fact that if she shut herself away from him it was by her father's orders. She will hear princely irony in his

I humbly thank you; well, well, well.

She has brought back his gifts, and that will wound him. He roughly denies them; she can then tax him with unkindness. She knows that they are being watched; and though it is all done for his good, she supposes, this will add to her constraint.

In his sardonic

Are you honest . . . are you fair?

sounds an unspoken 'so my mother seemed'; and at her first close approach to him with the gifts he cannot but have gained--supersensitive as

¹ I think it most likely that Ophelia is meant to enter upon the inner stage and kneel at her father's stool (but she rises again at once at the sound of Hamlet's voice) at about the cue ' . . . lose the name of action.' It is just possible that she is kneeling there the whole time. But Polonius' 'Walk you here' is against this, and more so the fact that her presence, even so aloof, would distract our attention from the soliloquy.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

he now is, she unskilled in deceit—a sense of her discomfort. But in a little his abiding sense of his own profounder guilt draws from him the

I did love you once . . . you should not have believed me . . . I loved you not.

—that also being a paradox to which the time has given proof. And he passes to the pitiful conclusion:

Get thee to a nunnery; why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. . . . What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery.

—conclusion likewise to the train of thought begun upon ‘To be or not to be . . .’, and answer to that question.

He suddenly becomes aware that they are being watched; and can he resist the conclusion that she is in league with the watchers? It is one more spy and decoy set in his way, that is all. By stage tradition his inconsequent:

Where is your father?

is prompted by a movement of the arras and an actual glimpse of Polonius, or the King, or both. Something of the sort, no doubt, is intended. But it should not be too obvious, for that will discount the peculiar sensitiveness to things and thoughts hidden around him, the quick, uncertain clairvoyance of the ‘mad’ mind.

(Her clumsy, fearful lie:

At home, my lord.

HAMLET

(but there is danger in his look; what if he did find her father lurking; the question has its tragic answer later) shatters her credit with him. It is the second such wound. The first ranked his mother an adultress; and the poison of it infected all womanhood for him. But he has let himself still believe in this seeming innocence; and now it proves in its own fashion as false. And just such a brainstorm sweeps him as followed the Ghost's disappearance, and as will sweep him again when the King's guilt is proved; but it is an angrier, and therefore harsher, outbreak than these. The mind's lack of mastery is betrayed in the rash threat to the King:

those that are married already, all but one, shall live. . . .

And here is the vengeful iconoclast, distorting the image he once worshipped to the shape of his new loathing of it, that he may the better break and forget it:)

I have heard of your paintings, too, well enough; God has given you one face and you make yourselves another; you jig, you amble and you lisp, and nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath made me mad. . . .

What is Ophelia in the guise of his mother the harlot; Ophelia made symbol and scapegoat of her kind.)

Her bewildered, heart-broken outcry when he leaves her:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword,
The expectancy and rose of the fair state . . .

¹ Note the significant change from the 'thou' and the 'get thee to a nunnery' to the 'your . . . you . . . yourselves.'

A SECOND MOVEMENT

completed by likeness (in the return to verse) and contrast (between his calm thought and her agony) this section of the scene, soliloquy and duologue.¹

Next the King and Polonius reappear. Their minds are upon Hamlet, and they all but ignore the miserably sobbing girl, now that she has served her turn.² The King's disquiet is visibly increased; his misgivings are turning like a compass-needle towards the truth:

There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,
And I do doubt the huff and the disclose
Will be some danger

and the counter-movement and the lagging action of the play) is promptly advanced a step:

which for to prevent
I have in quick determination
Thus set it down— he shall with speed to England

Another valuable stroke of contrast; his 'quick determination' is set against Hamlet's interminable talk and delay.

¹ It is more minutely stated in pp. 264, 303 *et seq.*

² They do that is to say, according to F1, and most editors follow it. Q2 gives her an *exit* at the end of her speech and implies a quite arbitrary re-entrance later. From every point of view, I think, F1 does better. The continuity of the action will then not be broken by a cleared stage (and applause for Ophelia), and the oblivious concern of the two men with the growing menace of Hamlet's conduct is emphasised. Shakespeare stresses, what is more, this neglect of Ophelia in the text itself by giving Polonius that off-hand

How now, Ophelia,
You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said,
We heard it all.

HAMLET

Ophelia may well overhear the

he shall with speed to England,
For the demand of our neglected tribute . . .

since, as we are to learn a few scenes later, the matter is not kept secret; also her father's more sinister :

or confine him where
Your wisdom best shall think.

[She has been caught in the toil of matters too high and too hard for her. She stands apart; shaken, silent, ignored. Then she escapes.]

Hamlet prepares the play, and it is acted and answers its purpose. He is excitedly triumphant, for the King's guilt is now manifest. But when he seems to be at last about to 'swoop' to his revenge, he is summoned to his mother's closet, and the thought of her guilt takes first place again in his mind.

But no sooner has the King departed with his

Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.

than Hamlet returns. His wild invective is still fresh in our ears; and he is here again, and at his sanest. Nor at his sanest merely, but with his mind wholly occupied by his opinions upon the art of acting.

¹ I do not think that this is to impose too much alien imagination upon the text. Ophelia is not dismissed; and, having employed her so far, I do not think they trouble to speak so that she cannot overhear. On the other hand they have done with her—and show it. She would not follow them, then, when they depart, but simply 'make herself scarce.'

A SECOND MOVEMENT

It is the third use of this trick of surprise and contrast. We heard of him rushing wildly into Ophelia's presence, and next saw him quietly absorbed in a book. He rushed away, excited to full pitch by his plot to trap the King, and returned calmly deliberating upon death—but his own death!—and the hereafter. Now we have just seen him crazed with anger at discovering the trap laid for him, and baited—she consenting—with Ophelia; yet, but a few minutes later:¹

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus . . .

and so on for fifty lines more, in an elaborate and delicately ironical conspectus of dramatic criticism!

But it is not a mere dramatic trick, and only the extremes of contrast smack of madness. And these do but exaggerate a normal quality in him, the ability to range swiftly and clearly from one mood to another. There is a touch of genius in it. We saw it operate in his first greeting of Horatio, and while he awaited the Ghost on the platform; we shall see it again when he returns from his adventurous voyage purged of his madness, and can pass obliviously from Ophelia's grave and its emotions to the tale of the plot against him, to amusing himself with Osric, from that to preparing his mind for death.

Nor, in his seeming absorption here in these superfluously fine means to his end has he for-

¹ 'But a few minutes': this is the actual time involved; and as Shakespeare interposes no other, no *dramatic* time indication, this is the impression sustained.

HAMLET

gotten the end itself. This concern as to how that fateful speech shall be spoken is both safety-valve and disguise for his secret anxiety. And the clarity and concentration of his talk (though he lets it run away with him; the unreal world always more satisfying than the real) are but a measure of the keen mind alert again and ready to face the imminent issue.¹ We feel the controlled excitement beneath; and this dramatically validates the long digression at such a stage of climax.

There follows a notable little piece of Shakespearian stage-craft; of minor importance, but a good example of what can be done in the freedom of the platform stage.

Exeunt Players. Enter Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Hamlet. How now, my lord; will the King hear this piece of work?

Polonius. And the Queen too, and that presently

Hamlet. Bid the players make haste.

Exit Polonius.

Will you two help to hasten them?

Ros. } We will, my lord.
Guild. }

Exeunt.

Hamlet. What ho, Horatio?

Enter Horatio.

Horatio. Here, sweet lord; at your service. . . .

Those fifty-five lines of digression are offset by this brisk return to the action and its speeding forward, a moment or so of diversion separating the long speech to the players and another long one to Horatio. And see how the slight occasion is enriched. A messenger to say that the King would hear the play would have sufficed. But

¹ Compare this speech to those careless, detached, references to the 'cyril of children.'

A SECOND MOVEMENT

Polonius adds the importance of his own self-importance to the matter, while Hamlet finds mischievous satisfaction in despatching him— this high state dignitary and lately detected eavesdropper—like a lackey, to

Bid the players make haste.

Here are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern too. Their pretextless arrival suggests the hovering spies, Hamlet's prompt dismissal of them his growing distrust; and there is mockery in the very superfluity of their errand:

Will you two help to haster them?

Then, for contrast, the false friends are replaced by the true one: Hamlet turns contemptuously from them to find him.¹ And how eloquent is the change:

Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
As e'er my conversation coped withal . . .

A kaleidoscopic two minutes, barely that; if the actors are alive to their work, how illuminating! But only against the anonymous background of the platform stage can the effect be gained so economically and easily.

The thirty-line speech to Horatio, thus begun, serves a manifold purpose. It ballasts and steadies the action by providing a space of controlled quiet, of smooth-flowing and harmonious verse, between

¹ By the Folio's stage direction he does find him already standing there, by Q's he calls him in. The Folio's may well be the better effect, the contrast being easier to point, if Hamlet has only to turn from false friends to true and exclaim: 'Horatio, *thou* [a very slight stress will serve] art e'en as just a man .

H A M L E T

Hamlet's glancing cerebrations and the deeper disturbance which the play-scene begins. And it does this in showing us the most equably minded Hamlet we have seen yet. While he waited with Horatio on the platform for the Ghost to appear he spoke of

particular men
That for some vicious mole of nature in them. . . .
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect
Being nature's livery, or fortune's star . . .
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault . . .

and had, surely, his own tendency to 'weakness and melancholy' in mind—which we have since seen so obsessing him. Now he is for the first time alone with Horatio, and they are together for the first time since then.¹ And he forgets himself and his troubles, not in such self-delighting talk as he lavished on the players, but in loving praise of his friend, whose virtues, he knows, are the very ones he himself lacks; and he seeks, upon the verge of this ordeal, to strengthen himself in their strength. And one might suppose, by this measured calm, that the Hamlet who is passion's slave, the victim of that 'vicious mole of nature,' was now well in hand. He admits that Horatio's original scepticism may be justified after all. For if the King's

occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy. . . .

¹ All this in terms of the action. With what may be supposed to go on behind the scenes, unless Shakespeare indicates it, we have of course no concern. It is *inexistent*.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

No more trade, then, with the supernatural; no more imaginings, be they good or ill; but 'grounds more relative':

Give him heedful note,
For I mine eyes will rivet to his face;
And after we will both our judgments join
In censure of his seeming.

The Murder of Gonzago, that is to say, is to be acted peaceably to its end, the two are to compare notes after and determine—or not—upon a sound plan for a righteous vengeance. That is what Horatio would do; and it is what Hamlet, taking colour from him, intends himself to do. So the speech and his demeanour here are meant—ironically by the sequel—to tell us.

Now for the second time we see King, Queen and Court in ceremonial state; and to enhance upon the first occasion, the music of the '*kettle-drums and trumpets*,' the '*Danish march*' and the guard with their torches are added. Before our eyes Hamlet puts on, as he might a 'mask, his 'antic disposition'; it disguises his excitement, is an ambush from which to shoot his mockeries—arrows, plucked from his own flesh, poisoned by his own misery, which is assuaged when he can see them rankling elsewhere.

A tartness in the King's tone, as they passingly encounter, might warn him that his enemy was on guard. Polonius is a ridiculously easy prey to a jest. But the sight of his mother, gay and bedecked for the occasion, and her prettily affectionate

Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me.

sting him. He does not retaliate upon her; he cannot, of course, sit by her, for then he could not

H A M L E T

watch the King. So at whom should he strike but Ophelia?¹ The short exchange that follows is covertly poignant. They parted but a while ago; he savagely enraged, yet suffering too; she heart-broken, yet blaming only his madness. The tragic end, it seemed, to a once-beautiful, an always honourable love. Now, before all the Court, he marks her out for his attentions—with an indecent joke. There was freedom of speech enough in Renaissance Courts. But Ophelia is very young and not light-tongued herself, and the thing is an insult. Yet she cannot as publicly resent it, for Hamlet is a prince. Gossip has given him to her as a lover; in what sense a lover, in what esteem he holds her, must not such joking show? Her answers:

No, my lord. . . . Ay, my lord. . . . I think nothing,
my lord. . . . You are merry, my lord.

(the last as reproachful as she dare make it) show her miserably shamed, but turning the dignity of a gentle deference to her defence; until, recovering, and remembering his 'madness,' she rallies to the smile and the response which courtliness demands. But this will be worse torture to her than his rage, by far. He sees her now as the demure decoy, the hypocrite, the wanton at heart; and on her, at least, he can be

¹ Hamlet and the Queen have not met (always in terms of the play's action) since the scene at the Council table, when she entreated him so lovingly and he so coldly responded. The same thing happens here; he even repeats that ironical 'Good mother.' We must remember, too, the sort of woman that Gertrude is; the ageing beauty, attractive still, but having to make the most of what charms are left her, and not above coquetting in public, even playfully with her son.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

swiftly and cruelly revenged. It is the first out-cropping of his cruelty; that flaw in a nature sensitive even to weakness, ever tempted to shirk its battle against the strong to triumph over one weaker still.

The Murder of Gonzago, compared to *Hamlet* itself, is a slightly old-fashioned affair, with its dumb show and its lengths of sententious verse. But, for a play within a play to be effective, some such difference, some distinction between the immediate illusion and the illusion at second-hand, must be made. Its verse is not of the strength or quality of Æneas' tale to Dido. But that had to stir Hamlet from his lethargy. This is to provide a quiet and—till the moment of the poisoning—a negative background to the drama which must command our chief attention, the tense, silent and complex drama played by Hamlet, Horatio and the King, another facet of it by Hamlet and Ophelia, yet another by Hamlet, the Queen and the courtiers around.

One scene, we have just been told, is to 'come near the circumstance' of the old King's murder, and we shall more vaguely remember that Hamlet meant to write 'a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines'—presumably to point the likeness. We are prepared for such a climax to the business. But before the play proper can begin:

Hoboyes play. The dumbe shewe enters.

Enter a King and Queene, very lovingly: the Queene embracing him. She kneeles, and makes shew of Protestation unto him. He takes her up, and declines his head upon her neck. Layes him downe upon a Banke of Flowers. He seeing him a-sleepe, leaves him. Anon comes in a Fellowe, take off his Crowne, kisses it, and pourses poyson in the King's eares, and Exits. The Queene returnes, findes the King dead, and makes passionate Action. The

HAMLET

Poysoner, with some two or three Mutes, comes in againe, seeming to lament with her. The dead body is carried away: The Poysoner Wooes the Queene with Gifts, she seemes loath and unwilling awhile, but in the end accepts his love.

*Exeunt.*¹

Does not this fatally anticipate the promised critical scene? Will Claudius not 'blench' at so close a picturing—though a picturing only—of his crime? Let him do so, and is not Hamlet's purpose at once served, but Shakespeare's (so to say) aborted, the rest of the scene being then superfluous? Or, if Claudius manages to control himself, will he not, since 'this show imports the argument of the play,' stop the proceedings then and there? These questions have fomented controversy enough about the Dumb Show. Editors have answered them variously, producers in the main by omitting it. One editorial answer is that the King is at the moment talking to the Queen or Polonius, and does not see it. That can hardly be. Shakespeare does not leave such crucial matters in the air. Failing plain indication to the contrary, we must assume, I think, that whatever there is to be seen the King sees. Another answer is that while he sees the Show he does not suppose it to 'import the argument,' and is content to let it pass for an unlucky coincidence which no one can remark but he; for dumb shows are apt to be, as Hamlet says, 'inexplicable,' and the likeness may not be striking. This is more tenable; the Folio's labelling of the murderer as '*a Fellow*' does, in fact, suggest no such figure as the King's. And it

¹ Thus F1, which does not vary substantially from Q2, though it is worth noting that '*a Fellow*' replaces '*another man*.'

A SECOND MOVEMENT

is likely, I think, that the method of acting a dumb show differed greatly from that developed by this time for the acting of a play. It must inevitably have had more of the formal mime in it, which we commonly associate with ballet and the *Commedia dell'Arte*.¹ But the right answer will emerge from the text and the situation involved in it; we have only straightforwardly to work this out, instead of dodging or shirking the issue.

When the King sees the Dumb Show he is at once alert. Though here maybe a coincidence and no more, whatever Hamlet has a hand in will now be matter for suspicion. But what should he do? If the thing is mere coincidence, nothing. If it is a trap laid, he is not the man to walk straight into it—as he would by stopping the play for no reason he could give before it had well begun. He must wait and be wary. Ophelia (the acting of the Dumb Show has let her recover herself a little) voices the question for him:

What means this, my lord? Behike^{*} this show
imports the argument of the play

And Hamlet's answer.

Marry, this is nothing mallecho to ensur'd it
and his comment on the Prologue:

the players cannot keep counsel they'll tell all
point disquietingly away from coincidence.
'Miching mallecho . . . mischief tell all';
Claudius must be wary indeed.

¹ In the 1932 revival by the *Comédie Française*, the Dumb Show was acted in this fashion, fantastically and swiftly, and the King's ignoring it did not seem very 'strange.

H A M L E T

Here, then, is the battle joined at once, between the watcher and the watched. On the defensive is the King, whose best tactics, without doubt, are to brave the business out, calmly, smilingly, giving no slightest sign that he sees anything extraordinary in it, for the attack, Horatio, whose steady eye—he has assured us,—nothing will escape, and Hamlet, a-quiver with suppressed excitement, who after a while will try still vainly—by mocking look and word, to pierce that admirable composure. But for a long first-round, from the entry of the player King and Queen, it is a still and silent battle. Its background is the line after line of their smoothly flowing verse, which we hear but need not greatly heed. Our attention is for the three: for Claudius, conscious that he is being watched, and Hamlet and Horatio, their eyes riveted to his face.

The Dumb Show falls quite pertinently into Hamlet's—and Shakespeare's—scheme. The mimic play as a whole is a calculated insult both to King and Queen. The 'one scene' which 'comes near the circumstance' of the old King's death, and into which Hamlet has inserted his 'dozen or sixteen lines,' is to be the finishing stroke merely. Were it a single one, Claudius might outface it. It is the prolonged preliminary ordeal which is to wear him down. Upon the point of dramatic technique too, if the test of his guilt is to be limited to the one scrambled and excited moment of the

Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit . . .

—when our eyes and ears are everywhere at once, upon Hamlet, Lucianus and the King, upon the Queen and the courtiers too—the play's most

A SECOND MOVEMENT

vital crisis must be half lost in confusion. What Shakespeare means, surely, is to make this simply the culmination of a long, tense, deliberate struggle to break down the King's composure, on his part to maintain it. Treat it thus and the confusion, when at last it comes, makes its true effect. And the eighty lines of the spineless verse of *The Murder of Gonzago* are all they should be as a placid accompaniment to a silent and enthralling struggle. If the struggle is not the salient thing, if the ambling of the verse is made so instead it must lower the tension of the scene disastrously.¹ And we may, I think, acquit Shakespeare of meaning to do that.

But there is a minor theme for them to accompany, besides. After twenty-five lines the intention of the dialogue sharpens—in the Player Queen's

In second husband let me be accurst!
None wed the second but who killed the first . . .
The instances that second marriage move
Are base respects of thrift, but none of love;
A second time I kill my husband dead
When second husband kisses me in bed.

—to a glancing attack upon the Queen herself as she sits there. She, unlike Claudius, winces at once; and Hamlet, with his

That's wormwood, wormwood!

rashly endorsing this petty, superfluous triumph, encourages thereby the King's growing certitude that here is a trap laid for him, no mere coincidence.

¹ As producers of the play discover. They cut the Dumb Show and with it the cue for the silent struggle with the King. Then there is nothing much left to do but listen to those rather dreary lines and wait for Lucianus. Quite justifiably, that being so, as many of the lines as possible are cut. But Shakespeare did not put them in for nothing.

H A M L E T

This baiting of Gertrude will also set the whole Court agog, will, on the other hand, prevent both her and them from remarking the sterner struggle proceeding. (She outfaces the mockery as best she may. / They glance aside at her from their watching of the play, scandalised, suppressing their smiles. They glance apprehensively, at the King; what has he to say to the outrage? He is caught between the obligation to resent it and the need to keep calm under the deadlier and secret accusation. To this enrichment of the foreground picture the background of the mimic play will prove none too ample.

Upon the Player Queen's oath:

Nor earth to me give lood, nor Heaven light,
Sport and repose lock from me day and night
Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife,
If, once a widow, ever I be wife!

Hamlet seals his complicity by the satiric, audibly muttered:

If she should break it now!

It is like him that he cannot even now, when his purpose is at least well afoot, pursue it single-mindedly, must endanger it by these sinister diversions. For endanger it he plainly does. Horatio we see sticking to the task set him, steadily watching the King. But here is Hamlet, yielded to the old obsession of his mother's guilt, veritably provoking interference—and upon another count—before the critical scene, the finally revealing moment, is reached. To taunt the Queen to her face; and before Claudius, before the Court, to challenge her with that

Madam, how like you this play?

A SECOND MOVEMENT

is to jeopardise his whole plan. The plan does still succeed; but here also is the seed of his own subsequent failure to exploit its success. Did not the Ghost warn him:

Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught . . .

(But this chance of wounding and publicly shaming her he cannot bear to miss. And later, when she sends for him, the thought of scourging her with reproaches will dominate all else; and he will spare the King at his prayers, because of his unlikeness to a lustful, guilty lover; and, lost in the sating of his wrath against her, he will kill Polonius, and so deliver himself into his enemy's hands.)

But, for the time, the tide is with him. The Queen does not appeal to Claudius to stop the play; she puts up no better defence than the wryly merry:

The lady doth protest too much, methinks.

And Claudius dare not stop it, lest that should prove him guilty upon the graver count. He is reduced to demanding, lamely:

Have you heard the argument? is there no offence in't?

No offence!—when already his Queen and his marriage have been publicly insulted by these hired and abetted players. Hamlet, seeing that the courage is out of him, lashes him, stingingly, pointedly, casting, for the first time, the one fatal word full in his face:

No, no, they do but jest, *poison* in jest; no offence i' the world!

H A M L E T

—mockingly dares him to unmask, knowing he dare not; and, upon the still supiner

What do you call the play?

himself unmasks, scornfully sure now of victory. His savagely comic impromptu title labels his enemy mere vermin:

The Mouse-trap Marry, how? Tropically This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna: Gonzago is the duke's name, his wife, Baptista. You shall see anon, 'tis a knavish piece of work but what of that? your majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not let the galled jade wince our withers are unwrung.

Enter Lucianus . . .

The critical scene has come. Again how like Hamlet to have forestalled it and discounted its value by giving Claudius such open warning of what was coming! But a sense of triumph possesses him. By the outflung

This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King

(to the king, to King Hamlet, not Duke Gonzago) he avows himself master of these puppets. It is with a sort of insolent confidence that he momentarily turns for another bout of bawdry with Ophelia, and then back for his firing of the mine:

Begin, murderer, leave thy damnable faces, and begin

He seems indeed to have Claudius beaten. And with the

He poisons him i' the garden for 't is late. His name's Gonzago, the story is extant, and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife

he scourges him from the field.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

(But it is a barren victory, lacking its conclusive stroke, and to be turned against the victor. Hamlet—all forgetful of the promised joining of judgments with Horatio—was, it would seem, about to bridge fiction to fact, tax Claudius with the murder to his face and before the world, and take his revenge, if it might be, then and there. But, failing to do this, it is a fatal error to unmask. For Claudius, in the safe retreat he gains, will turn that now useless ‘madness’ to his own protection and profit, leaving his enemy meanwhile to vaunt his triumph in sounding words.)

¹ Since I owe so much to Dr. Dover Wilson’s latest editing of the play, it is perhaps only right to record my total disagreement with his interpretation of the play-scene.

He thinks the King does not see the Dumb Show. I have already given my reasons against that. But the Dumb Show is also, he holds, a deliberate betrayal by the Players of Hamlet’s plan; the fact that the King does not see it is a providential stroke of luck; Hamlet’s ‘miching mallecho’ is an expression of anger at the mishap, his ‘the players cannot keep counsel . . .’ an apprehension of more trouble to come. The ‘posy-prologue’ is another offence and Lucianus’ ‘damnable faces’ and his speaking of ‘thoughts black . . .’ yet another, a wilful disregard of the advice to speak the speech ‘trippingly,’ not to ‘strut and bellow.’ The scene, by this reading of it, faces, so to speak, two ways. There is the effect of the play upon the King and Queen (duplicate already in itself) and there will be the effect upon Hamlet of the jeopardy of his plan.

I might argue that with the material Dr. Dover Wilson selects no actor of Hamlet could convey to an audience all this extra and very different kind of anxiety. Nor do I see how the actors of *The Murder of Gonzago* could help him much. But the proof of that pudding, it might be answered, is in the eating; who is to decide that the thing cannot be done? I prefer to plead that it is, in itself, a thing which Shakespeare would never try to do. He would never dissipate the force of such a scene by so dividing its interest, or handicap Hamlet at this juncture with a quite extraneous difficulty. Besides,

HAMLET

King, Queen, Court, attendants and players all vanish clamorously. At this point, and with this help, the actor of Hamlet is accustomed to lift his part in the scene to such a high pitch of emotion that descent from it is most difficult, and transition into the key of what follows must seem forced. Hamlet is, of course, intensely excited; but it is an intellectual excitement and one not beyond his control. Hence Shakespeare's use of the light and inconsequent lyric:

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play,
For some must watch, while some must sleep:
So runs the world away . . .

and the ironically fanciful

Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers if the rest
of my fortunes turn Turk with me, with two Provincial
roses on my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of
players, sir?

instead of such verse—into which emotion more naturally flows—as follows the Ghost's disappearance, or as we shall find in the scene to come with his mother, or of such hammering phrases as those he levelled at Ophelia when she denied that her father was spying on them. And the fantasy and banter serve to relieve the strain of what has gone before.

there is literally nothing in the play which is not, in some way or another, germane to its story or illustrative of Hamlet's character, or a consequence, direct or indirect, of what he does or leaves undone. Such an irrelevancy as this betrayal of his plan by the players, springing from nothing, leading nowhere, would be a rift in the fabric, and dramatically meaningless.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

Then follows :

O good Horatio ! I'll take the ghost's word for a pound. Didst perceive ?

Very well, my lord.

Upon the talk of the poisoning ?

I did very well note him.

—and we are back into the main current action again.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern return. In the first glance he reads something of their mission on their faces; and, for a mischievous imp, he calls after the players to bring back their

¹ Here, I think, F1's directions are certainly to Q2's, which bring the two on only after music-recorders have been called for. F1 makes them call Horatio's

I did verie well note him.

and Hamlet to exclaim, surely at the sight of them

Oh, ha. Come some Musick. Come ve Recorders—makes him, that is to say, since he guesses that from the King, promptly provide himself with a sword and a screen against their unwelcome attentions. The difference between Q2's 'Ah ha' and F1's 'Oh, ha' is an effective one, as a direction to the actor.

² The Dumb Show had been accompanied by Q2 merely says *The Trumpets sounds. Dumb show enters.* has *Hoboyes play. The dumbe shewe enters.* was customary at private theatres and Court performances. The play began, and between the acts if the players were divided. The public theatres had music when they needed it, and it would be a great addition to a stage. For *The Murder of Gonzago* played at the Court by Shakespeare's company would make the most of the provision they could afford. The later stage directions

Enter the Players with Recorders.

may well imply that this had been the accompaniment

H A M L E T

observing, as he waits, and keeps them waiting
chafing and ignored :

For if the king like not the comedy,
Why, then, belike he likes it not, perdy.
Come, some music !

1 other words : ' This entertainment, my good
, is not over yet.

severe tone his good friends take with him
the temper in which the King has sent them,
they filter this through a sort of sorrowful
h. Hamlet is a little hard on these young
They are courtiers, and time-servers, no
and moral nonentities ; but their behaviour,
umstances considered, is surely unexcep-
. All ease of comradeship between the
as, however, now vanished. Guildenstern
s their errand—to Hamlet's still oblivious
would seem :

od my lord, vouchsafe me a word with you.
rned on with a menacingly bland

Sir, a whole history.

veritable duel begins ; ' Sirs ' and ' my
one side and the other ; Hamlet bitingly
uildenstern helpless to pass his guard.

Show. F1 has only :

Enter one with a Recorder.

lsequent text is altered accordingly. But then the
ow here has been accompanied by ' Hoboyes,'
oye cannot be used in the business of the scene.
utters in a modern production is that there should
suitable music, if possible visibly played. What
for Hamlet to exclaim :

ome, some music. Come, the recorder, . . .

an entirely new idea ; and, later, for the player
e on, as if it had been produced f om nowhere.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

He does touch him, however, with the unexpected

The Queen, your mother, in most great affliction of spirit, hath sent me to you.

'That canker spot is set throbbing again; and there could be no better way—we may imagine or not the King thinking so—to distract Hamlet's mind from its deadly purpose. He responds, on the instant, blandly still:

You are welcome.

But a second, too familiar 'your mother . . . foment such a dangerously teeming

Sir, I cannot. . . Make you a wholesome answer; my wit's diseased; but, sir, such answer as I can make, you shall command; or rather, as you say, my mother: therefore no more, but to the matter—my mother, you say,—

that Guildenstern gives way and Rosencrantz comes fresh to the rescue. The Queen also is amazed at his conduct. The infection works on; this 'mother . . . mother . . . mother . . .' beating like a pulse:

O wonderful son, that can so astonish a mother! But is there no sequel at the heels of this mother's admiration? Impart.

He is to speak with her in her closet ere he goes to bed.

We shall obey, were she ten times our mother.

—and obeying, and slaking his stored bitterness upon her, he will avenge, not a father's murder, but a husband's shame, hers too and his own, and gratify and exhaust and betray himself in doing so.

H A M L E T

While Claudius is assuring his own safety, this will absorb him.

The diplomat Rosencrantz, to his royally harsh

Have you any further trade with us?

offers a pathetic

My lord, you once did love me.

But the frank, confiding Hamlet is no more. He does not trouble to put a term to such friendship, derides it instead :

So I do still, by these pickers and stealers.

And in place of the secret they would pick and steal from him (yet how should they even now imagine what this 'grief' is that he denies them?) he pays them once more with the false coin of

Sir, I lack advancement.

and, mischievously turns—the dilettante* prince again!—to give impressive greeting to the recorders.

He then turns back to the now somewhat sulky Guildenstern; first with a warning question :

why do you go about to recover the wind of me
as if you would drive me into a toil?

and, since that draws a canting answer, to deriding him also, with the

Will you play upon this pipe? . . .

and the rest. And he ends with a sharper warning still :

'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on
than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will,
though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.

They had better have taken it in time, those two.
At which point Polonius appears.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

Here is in some sort a repetition of the earlier picture of Hamlet, Polonius, the two friends, and the players in attendance, when he sat trifling his time away, they smilingly subservient to his mood, and the notion of *The Murder of Gonzago* was about to dawn on him. All four are harshly astrain now, and Polonius is peremptory and—though precariously—much upon his dignity:

My lord, the Queen would speak with you, and presently.¹

But an extra and outrageous turn of the antic disposition effectively deflates him:

Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of camel?

By the mass and 'tis like a camel indeed.

Methinks it is like a weasel?

It is backed like a weasel.

Or like a whale?

Very like a whale.

Then will I come to my mother by and by.

(Fool a madman to the top of his bent; if, less mad than you think, he fools you in return, that is but fair.) Then, with a single gesture, and a

Leave me, friends,

he rids himself of them all.²

¹ The word, so continually used by Shakespeare for 'at once,' has unluckily lost that meaning to us; though, to Scottish audiences, it has not.

² Another instance of the frictionless technique of the Elizabethan stage. Here are five or six characters dismissed from the scene at a word, yet the effect will not be one of rabbits scurrying nately into their holes, as it would be upon a realistically scenic stage. For when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appeared, Horatio lapsed into onlooking; so did they when Polonius came; and the players with the recorders are impersonal figures. Therefore all of them but

HAMLET

Does that repeated 'by and by,' which he opposes to Polonius' sharp 'presently,' speak of a suddenly stinging thought that he might best go to his mother after—only after!—he had done his deadly business with the king? ¹ I think so; and the actor can convey it well enough by look and intonation, and by now letting the swift, irritable, sequence ignite and flame out in

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world: now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. . . .

But with that the little blaze of excitement—for it is no more, it does not resolve into purpose—dies down. The more deeply rankling injury in him stirs again:

Soft! now to my mother . . .

But he pauses before he goes, in a sort of dread, in something very like prayer:

O heart! lose not thy nature; let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom;
Let me be cruel, not unnatural;
I will speak daggers to her, but use none. . . .

Polonius, when the moment comes for their dismissal, have, against the negative background, lost individuality a little, have been brought, in comparison with the solid and vital figure of Hamlet, to something the dramatic value of a bas-relief; and they can—this is the point—disappear without distracting our attention from Hamlet, or checking the impetus of the scene. And this is a very important point, since the end of the scene is now so near.

¹ 'By and by' can also mean 'at once,' but I think that in this instance it does not. The *O.E.D.* gives earlier examples of both senses.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

For it comes to him that he has changed and hardened since his task was laid on him, and he learned with what he had to do; with treachery, and adultery, and murder at its foulest. And self-thwarting and self-contempt have helped to make him cruel of heart. But he needs to be cruel, to be callous and ruthless too. Of what use are finer qualities, with everything around him—comradeship, love, even his mother's love for him—turned by his enemy to instruments of evil? He must strike, and spare no one. Yet along what paths, and towards what spiritual abysses may not this temper lead him? We have seen him vengefully torturing Ophelia. His love for his mother lies deeper than that love lay, its ruin in him may be the more destructive.

The King, momentarily secure, decides to expedite Hamlet's departure for England. The sight of the mimic murder has roused his sleeping, stubborn conscience, and, left alone, he struggles with it. And ---Hamlet being by now, he must suppose, safe in his mother's closet—he even kneels and tries to pray. But Hamlet, as it happens, is still only on his way there; and passing by, he has the unknowing King at his mercy. Yet he spares him, lest, killed at prayer, his enemy should escape everlasting damnation.

Shakespeare, at this juncture, must make sure that, despite the excitement, the threads of his story hold taut, and that none of its various interests is forgotten. So while the King has been out of our sight his messengers have kept us in mind of him, and the coming scene with the Queen has been prepared. Here is more preparation for it and

H A M L E T

for what is to happen after it. Hamlet shall be sent 'forthwith' to England. Claudius looks ahead; his adversary only tangles himself in each new snare set in his path. Then comes Polonius with the news that Hamlet is on his way to the Queen. The old gentleman moves like a rapidly connecting shuttle between these three scenes—the present, the last and the next, very usefully links them together, they themselves being the link between the crisis of the play-scene and the strenuous closet-scene—and helps speed them along.

But this scene at the outset has been rather oddly held up by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The King tells them that such outbreaks of lunacy begin to make him fear for his life—which is both the truth and a politic reason for what he means to do. It behoves them to express their concern; but Guildenstern's

Most holy and religious fear it is
To keep those many many bodies safe
That live and feed upon your majesty . . .

and Rosencrantz' heavily charged homily which follows, upon the transcendent value of a kingly life, come strangely from these two. The whole passage has an artificial air. 'Topical allusion,' one exclaims; and the assassination of kings was, indeed, in Shakespeare's day a perennially topical subject. But there is explanation enough within the play's own bounds.

Claudius will not send the heir to the throne overseas without consulting his Council. A scene or so later we have his

Come, Gertrude, we'll call up our wisest friends;
And let them know both what we mean to do,
And what's untimely done . . .

A SECOND MOVEMENT

—the case against Hamlet being by then an even better one, since he has killed Polonius. And when, soon after that, he appears to pass judgment on the culprit, he does so attended by his Councillors—though Q2 must put it thriftily: *Enter King and two or three*—his authority sustained by theirs. Shakespeare's first idea, I fancy, was to bring this Council into the present scene; and these speeches, inappropriately given now to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are the remnant of it. The change—if there was one—is certainly an improvement. The action flows more swiftly here without the Councillors; and they are more dramatically useful later when they confront, hands on swords, the then convictedly dangerous Hamlet.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern departed to arm them for their 'speedy voyage,' Polonius to warn the Queen of Hamlet's coming and 'convey' himself behind the arras before he can arrive, Claudius is left alone. It is the first time that we see him so. And the adulterer, the murderer and usurper, so cool and collected till now—but for that one moment during the mimic play¹—now incontinently bends and writhes under the dreadful burden of his remorse. We have been prepared for

¹ And the breakdown there is commonly much exaggerated by actors. Claudius should, even at that moment, keep some measure of self-control and depart as much apparently in anger as in fear. We hear of him immediately after '... in his retirement marvellous distempered ... with choler'—for which he has the excellent excuse of the insult offered to the Queen, the scandalous tenor of the play from that point of view. It is in this that he would wish the Court to see Hamlet's particular offence, and in his madness generally the danger to be dealt with.

H A M L E T

some such revulsion by the earlier lines, spoken aside, about the harlot's cheek beautied with plastering art being not more ugly than is his deed to his painted word, and by the 'O heavy burden!' with which they end. But I strongly suspect that these were inserted as an afterthought (lest the turn here should prove *too* unexpected to be convincing, or seem a mere superficial consequence of the shock of the play-scene),¹ and that the original effect was meant to be one of arresting surprise. For here, not in the revelation during the play-scene, is the action's true turning point. That was a flash in the pan. But upon what happens now—or, rather, does *not* happen—the rest of the play depends; from this moment the tragedy and its holocaust are precipitated. Incidentally, it is always referred to as 'the prayer-scene.' But this is a misnomer more than usually misleading; since the whole point is that though Claudius strives to pray he cannot, that Hamlet spares him because he thinks he is praying, while, if he knew what was in his mind, he would presumably dispatch him then and there, and all, but for Gertrude's grief and the scandal, would be well over. It is upon this master-stroke of irony that everything turns; upon a Claudius battling within himself for his salvation and losing, and a Hamlet refusing to kill him lest he should *not* be damned.

The technical make-up of the scene; Claudius' soliloquy lapsing into the silence of the attempted prayer, the surprise of Hamlet's appearance (we

¹ They have just that manufactured air about them. The actor may give to the speaking of them all the conviction he can, they remain 'dead.' For further discussion of this point, see p. 272.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

imagine him, as Claudius must, already with his mother, Polonius having outsped him there), his surprise at the chance offered him, his soliloquy imposed, so to speak, upon the other—all that is unique in the play. Nor are we anywhere given harder or closer-knit argument. Each competes with the other in this; and we have a solid intellectual knot tied, a steadying interlude between the excitements of the play-scene and the emotions of the coming encounter with the Queen. Each antagonist is unaware of the other, Claudius of Hamlet's presence, Hamlet of what is in Claudius' mind. Each reaches a characteristic conclusion; Hamlet, with his revenge to his hand, is dissatisfied with its quality and refuses it; Claudius faces the truth about himself as he rises from his knees—

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

--and, his own life spared, goes, single-minded again, to write the letter which is to compass Hamlet's death. And all Hamlet has gained is a fresh reminder of him

in the incestuous pleasure of his bed. . . .

—more fuel, that is to say, for the already dangerous mood in which he now takes his interrupted way to his mother.

Hamlet comes to reproach his mother for her sin. Discovering that for the second time he is being spied on, he 'whips out his rapier' and kills the unseen Polonius. Despite his father's bidding, he is upon the point, in his rage, of telling his mother that her lover and husband was her husband's

HAMLET

murderer, when the Ghost's reappearance prevents this. It is a gentler 'visitation,' and softens him for a while. But he departs savage and embittered still. Claudius comes for news of what has past, learns of Polonius' death, and sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with guards to arrest this now provedly dangerous madman.

The encounter with the Queen, as acted, too often becomes a moral lecture delivered by a grieved young man to a conscience-stricken matron. It is not meant, of course, to be anything of the sort. For one thing, Shakespeare would never bring this most passionate theme to a sententious crisis. For another, he habitually treats age in his characters as freely as he treats time in a play's action, conventionally, or (within the bounds of likelihood) for dramatic effect alone—and so he does here. Hamlet is 'young.' It looks as if Shakespeare first thought of him as about twenty, as the student returning to Wittenberg; late in the play he takes the trouble to make him a definite thirty, evidently to justify the developed maturity of his mind. But he remains conventionally 'young.' Gertrude—if we argue the matter out, but we do not—might then be approaching fifty by the calendar, and in real life have come to look matronly and middle-aged enough. But, played by a boy upon Shakespeare's stage, this is just what she could not plausibly be made to look. There she must be either conventionally 'old' or conventionally 'young.' And since she must be shown sensually in love with Claudius, and seductive enough to make him commit murder for her sake, she clearly—the sole choice lying between the two—must be

A SECOND MOVEMENT

young.' And the force of Hamlet's reproach that at her age

The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble
And waits upon the judgment . . .

is that, while to intolerant youth (never so intolerant as upon this issue) this should be so with her, it all too patently is not. From this, in fact, springs the tragedy; poor Gertrude's blood was not tame. In this the story of the play is rooted, and much of its meaning will be missed if the point is not from first to last kept clear.

The 'movement' or 'make-up' of this scene is also a little unusual. First come five lines of bustling prelude from Polonius, which link it to the two scenes just past. Then we hear Hamlet coming, vociferating as he comes; once more it is that obsessive

Mother, mother, mother! ¹

Begging Gertrude to be 'round with him, Polonius slips behind the arras; and the—some-what tremulous—bravado of her

I'll warrant you,

Fear me not.

prepares us for the imminent clash.

They are alone together for the first time; and their estrangement till now—her gentle efforts to mend it countered by his constrained courtesy or insolent sarcasm—has been but a longer prepara-

¹ Only the Folio gives it (though Q. indicates something of the sort), and it has been held to be an interpolation by Burbage. It has, in any case, dramatic value. It helps bind these scenes together, strengthens a little the fresh resurgence of Hamlet's wrath against the Queen, and warns her to brace herself for his coming.

HAMLET

tion for the moment. She has amply enough now to incense her in the insult of *The Murder of Gonzago*; and her own anger, as we noted, will blind her to any further reason for the King's. Without prelude, then (and with an almost childish lack of dignity), they join battle:

Now, mother, what's the matter?

Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

Mother, you have my father much offended.

Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.

Why, how now, Hamlet!

What's the matter now?

Have you forgot me?

No, by the rood, not so:

You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife;

And,—would it were not so!—you are my mother.

—to which last savage stroke she has no answer. And upon her impotent and most imprudent

Nay then, I'll set those to you that can speak. . . .

she finds herself in his hard grasp and flung back in her chair again (where she had enthroned herself to receive him), and next so menaced by the fierceness of his

you shall not budge;

You go not till I set you up a glass

Where you may see the inmost part of you. . . .

that she cries aloud for help. It is not that threat which frights her, but plainer danger. For despite him, and as he feared, the 'soul of Nero' is astir in Hamlet. And did not Polonius from his hiding echo her cry and draw the frenzied rage upon himself, the sword-thrust that despatches him might truly, in a moment more, have been for her.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

For there is a mad, Neronic gaiety in the

How now, a rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead!
the sanguine

is it the King?
and the jingle of

A bloody deed! almost as bad, good mother,
As kill a king and marry with his brother.

In her bewildered horror she can only echo
vaguely

As kill a king!
and he is himself again in the ominously stern

Ay, lady, 'twas my word

They face each other, anger purged by calamity.
And she is spared the imminent revelation; for
Hamlet turns to the slain:

Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool farewell!
I took thee for thy better; take thy torture,
Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger . . .

But this, in cold blood, from the sensitive and
chivalrous Hamlet for elegy upon an old man -
Ophelia's father too whom he has recklessly
killed!¹ It is proof of the dire change worked in

¹ Is Hamlet meant to think that the eavesdropper is the King, and the actor to show this? I believe not, for we are aware that he has just come wittily from the King's closet where he has left him on his knees. And this unlikelihood can be pointed if Polonius hides on the opposite side of the stage. He is not, surely, meant to *think* at all. He reacts, as if by instinct, to the cry from behind the arras, he is so excited as to be 'beyond himself'. The connection of ideas, if any, will be with the former eave-dropping, and his murderous impulse then. His 'Is it the King?' is the unreasoningly hopeful question of the imaginative man, who always expects good luck to do better for him than he can for himself.

H A M L E T

him; and for Gertrude, as he turns back to her, some warning of what—be he mad or sane—she may now expect. The deed itself too, futile as it proves to be, its mere doing (for him, the *doing* of anything after the long thwarting and inaction) gives him, for the moment, a terrible authority, under which she shrinks cowed.

This unusual initial crisis over—but we may call Polonius' fate the catastrophe of his busy-bodding through the two preceding scenes, and the uninterrupted action makes this view of it effective—the encounter, as Hamlet has meant it to be, begins; with his

Peace! sit you down
And let me wring your heart. . . .

But he talks a language she does not understand, less of ill-deeds themselves than the hidden springs of them, and of the infection their evil may spread till the whole world be 'thought-sick' with it.

So he begins again, and speaks as to a child—

Look here, upon this picture, and on this;
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers . . .¹

¹ Does Hamlet point to two pictures on the wall, compare two miniatures, the one of his father which he wears, the other of Claudius worn by Gertrude, or see—and try to make her see—the two in his mind's eye? Personally, I pronounce without hesitation for the miniatures. The pictures on the wall seem hardly in place, either in Gertrude's closet or the Globe Theatre. That they appear in an illustration to Rowe's edition is no recommendation at all. And the pictures seen in the mind's eye will not point the dramatic contrast between the tremendous and obscure metaphors in the surrounding speeches and the clear simplicity of this imagery, while the miniatures in the actor's hands help to do so.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

—to try to make her understand. But that does not move her either. He reasons, he scolds, he bullies; until, battering her with ever grosser and grosser words, he at last has her morally down, and pitifully crying:

O Hamlet! speak no more;
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul. . . .

And then he treads her in the mire:

Nay, but to live,
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty.

Such sparks of the dreaded 'soul of Nero' as there were in him flamed and died with the killing of Polonius. But here is cruelty enough, in the loosing upon the wretched woman of this long-pent store of resentful rage. And so transported is he as to come again to the very point of dealing her the deadlier blow, which will turn these mad hints of murder to plain fact—when, providentially, the Ghost appears.

A very different 'visitation' this from the imposing vision of the battlements; no armed imperious figure, but

My father, in his habit as he liv'd.¹

—lived even here in unsuspecting happiness with wife and son; no sternly renewed mandate, nor the condemnation Hamlet looks for of his lapse in time and passion. But a gently reproachful

Do not forget . . .

¹ *Enter the Ghost in his night-gown* (i.e. the long robe which the King would have worn at night in the ease of his private apartments) says the occasionally most useful Q1.

H A M L E T

—a pale, inverted, echo of that parting, commanding ‘Remember me,’ and the pitiful

But, look! amazement on thy mother sits;
O! step between her and her fighting soul . . .

—for he divines a grace in her, as Hamlet does not, as she herself, it may be, does not yet. Then, after a little, a silent stealing away. It is as if, with the passing of time, the spirit had lost material power, was nearer to its rest, and to oblivion.

These thirty-five lines make a centre of calm in storm. It is a strange reunion for the three; and its pathos is epitomised in the question and answer between mother and son:

To whom do you speak this?

Do you see nothing there?

Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.

Nor did you nothing hear?

No, nothing but ourselves.

‘Nothing at all; *yet all that is I see.*’ So speak the spiritually blind.

Hamlet rages at her no more. But the compassion stirred in him soon hardens to irony. He has, she tells him, cleft her heart in twain. His

O, throw away the worser part of it,
And live the purer with the other half. . . .

only precludes the

Good-night; but go not to mine uncle’s bed;
Assume a virtue if you have it not . . .

and praise of ‘that monster custom.’ Trust not to change of heart. Put on the ‘frock and livery’ of repentance, and you may come to be

A SECOND MOVEMENT

what you pretend to be. The unheroic way is best. For him, he must be Heaven's 'scourge and minister' and 'cruel to be kind.' Yet these so 'stern effects' in him are, it would seem, something of a frock and livery too. For, his passion spent, his cruelty sated, he now himself melts into repentant tears over old Polonius' body. But worse than this ill deed 'remains behind'; the work prescribed him is still to do.

At which point, upon the rhymed couplet, it looks as if he had once been meant to depart and the scene between the two to conclude. But there were various technical reasons against that. For one, our interest must be guided out of this seething eddy—as the purposeless, forbidden attack upon Gertrude has been—back to the main stream of action again, the struggle between Hamlet and Claudius. Shakespeare provides a short cut to it by making Hamlet already aware of his so-called mission to England (we may suppose, if we question the matter, that the project had not been kept secret: it was spoken of before Ophelia), and even leaps ahead in allowing him prevision of its treachery—of which we have still to learn. For another reason; the action - Claudius in command—is now sweeping forward to his departure, and such a 'full close' would badly check its flow.¹ Nor (upon the point of character) will Hamlet finish with his mother in such a gentle mood. He 'must be cruel'; and he turns back to whet his cruelty once more on her. No passionate indignation here, nor compassionate

¹ Shakespeare, as we have already noted (p. 19), does even more to avoid this by not 'ending' the scene at all, but 'transposing' it into the next.

HAMLET

appeal to her to repent; but for answer to her miserable

What shall I do?

the cold sarcasm of

Not this, by no means, that I bid you do:
Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed,
Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse . . .

He even taunts her with being ready, no doubt, to sell her son—at such a price!—to her paramour:

And let him, for a pair of reechy kisses,
Or paddling in your neck with his damn'd fingers,
Make you to ravel all this matter out,
That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft.¹

¹ The scene has not been swept clear of all tokens of the disclosure of the murder—explicit in Q1. Hamlet has given her no particular evidence—as the text now stands—of being only 'mad in craft'; rather the contrary. And her protest that she has 'no life to breathe' what he has said to her is not what seems called for merely by his ravings against her union with Claudius, or even by his general reckless abuse of him—in which, certainly, the phrase 'a murderer and a villain' did occur, but it was of a piece with the rest.

Dover Wilson has it that an important part of Hamlet's problem must be whether or no to justify his killing of the King by telling the world the truth. Will they believe it if he does? Is he thus to blacken his mother's name? Will she not inevitably be accounted an accomplice in the murder? On the other hand, if he does not, or if he only tells the Queen, will he not be accounted a mere murderer himself, striking to recover the crown? But the problem is surely insoluble; and for that excellent reason Shakespeare does not direct our attention to it. At some stage of the play's development Hamlet did explicitly tell the Queen, of that there can be little doubt. Why the change? Because the Queen could not carry the knowledge through the rest of the play without her relations to Claudius being gravely affected by it, and

A SECOND MOVEMENT

He has recovered his cruelty, too, when he turns once more to the dead Polonius; that

For this same lord,
I do repent . . .

giving place to

I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.

And in the final

Good night, mother.

is summed up all his past play of mockery on the word.

Shakespeare does not want to add this complication to the story. I am disposed to think that at no time did he let himself in for it, but that the postulated 'assembler' of Q₁ (in which, as it happens, this scene's text is more than usually corrupt) could not resist the temptation to make the more obvious effect, either upon his own account or by borrowing it from the earlier play; the consequences were of small concern to him.

Whether or no the scene was once meant to end upon the 'cruel to be kind' couplet, there is a difference of text between F₁ and Q₂ in its immediate continuation which involves a slight dramatic difference and is worth noting. In F₁, Hamlet is brought back by Gertrude's cry--of a woman left lonely and helpless, she can make it:

What shall I do

This carries the scene smoothly on. In Q₂, Hamlet, of his own motion, returns with a

One word more, good lady.

That marks his deliberate intention not to leave her in any gentle mood. The change was probably made in order to eliminate the 'dead moment' occasioned by Hamlet's 'false exit' (to use the technical phrase) and his return, the Queen left at a dramatic loss the while.

HAMLET

Hamlet gone, Claudius arrives.¹ He has been too apprehensive to wait for Polonius' promised return with news; and we note that his first thought when he hears of the 'good old man's'

¹ I have dealt on p. 19 with the question of the false act division here. There is also that of the difference in the text itself between Q2 and F1. Which version should we follow? Q2 gives us:

Exit.

Enter King, and Queene, with Rosencraus and Gylidensterne.

King. There's matter in these sighes, these profound heaves,

You must translate, tis fit we understand them,
Where is your sonne?

Ger. Bestow this place on us a little while.

Ah mine owne Lord, what I have seene to-night?

—which can be made to imply either that Hamlet goes out on the inner stage and that the Queen goes out simultaneously in the opposite direction, to re-enter immediately on the outer stage with the King, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or that she emerges from the inner stage to encounter them there, or that the King and the two courtiers enter to her on the inner stage — though 'this place' is a likelier reference to the no-man's-land of the outer stage than to the closet — and that she and the King emerge upon the outer stage later, possibly upon the King's:

O Gertrude! come away. . . .

Upon the outer stage they certainly must be six lines later, for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are told that

Hamlet in madness hath Polonius slain,

And from his mother's closet hath he dragg'd him . . .

i.e. from some place other than this.

The Folio has:

Exit Hamlet tugging in Polonius.

Enter King.

—and the dialogue follows practically as in Q2, except that, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern being absent, the line dismis-

A SECOND MOVEMENT

slaying—after a somewhat perfunctory ‘O heavy deed!’—is that

It had been so with us had we been there

For though, as we shall see later when he fronts Laertes, he is no poltroon, his nerve is shaken now. Yet the supple brain works but the quicker and better under the pressure of fear; casting about and ahead, anticipating arguments, devising answers and excuses, planning new moves, and keenly alert—diplomatist that he is—to the ever-shifting pattern of events. But he is anxious

sing them is naturally omitted. The King can, again, either enter on the outer stage, Gertrude emerging to greet him; or on the inner, and they can both emerge later—between which alternatives there is little dramatically to choose. But the Folio text, in omitting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s first appearance altogether, and sparing us the slight delay of their dismissal, carries the action forward without check to its impulse; and, as there are other signs that this hereabouts is in general Shakespeare’s aim, I think it may well represent his own second thoughts, and I recommend it to producers.

There remains the question of the King’s opening lines. They fit—though a little clumsily—an entrance *with* Gertrude, as given in Q₂, and they would about fill in the time it must take him to advance with her to the centre of the outer stage talking the while. They do not fit the Folio’s entrance for him, whether it be directly to her on the inner stage, or on the outer to be joined there by her. The obvious beginning here is with his

Where is your son?

or with her

Ah! my good lord, what have I seen to-night?

Does not then ‘There’s matter . . . understand them.’ remain in the Folio text by oversight, and will not the producer—if he follows the Folio; and I think he should—be right to omit it?

HAMLET

above all at the moment to be out of the neighbourhood of the lurking Hamlet, surrounded by his guards again, and his 'wisest friends.' And the scene's concluding rhymed couplet rings with his anxiety.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with what help they have mustered, find Hamlet and—speaking fair, as they have been bidden to—summon him to go with them to the King. He pretends to comply, but suddenly turns and runs, an obvious lunatic; and they all have to chase after him.

It is a macabre business, this torchlight hue and cry through the darkened castle after a lunatic homicide, and the search for the body—which he has ignominiously bundled beneath a staircase.

The Folio gives us, for the short scene's opening:

Enter Hamlet.

Ham. Sately stowed.

Gentlemen within *Hamlet, Lord Hamlet!*

Ham. What noise? Who calls on Hamlet?

Oh heere they come.

Enter Ros. and Guildenstern.

'Take Q2's more cursory

Enter Hamlet, Rosencraus, and others.

into consideration also, and we have Hamlet stealing in, possibly from between the now-closed curtains of the inner stage,¹ the distant voices of men seeking him, his sight of their torches as they come. It proves to be Rosencrantz and Guilden-

¹ They must be closed, if only for the removing of the furniture of the closet-scene.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

stern, securely joined now 'with some further aid'; and, though they 'speak fair,' turned peremptory too:

What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?

Twenty-five lines of combative dialogue follow; Hamlet, masterly in madness, hitting hard, Rosencrantz driven back upon futile dignity for self-defence. Before fellow-courtiers and servants, to have his princely companion call him a 'sponge'!

Av, sir; that coaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the King best service in the end: he keeps them, like an ape, in the corner of his jaw; first mouthed, to be last swallowed: when he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you, and, sponge, you shall be dry again.

—a change, indeed, from that first welcome to 'my excellent good friends,' and most unpleasantly near the mark. But, homicide and madman though he be, Hamlet is still a prince. He must go with them to the King, but they treat him with consideration still. And despite his wild talk he seems about to go quietly:

The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing. . . . Of nothing: bring me to him.

—when suddenly, with a

Hide fox, and all after.¹

he bolts away from them down the dark corridors, madder than ever. And the hue and cry goes on.

¹ F1 only; and our only indication of the running away—which may, therefore, be a late addition. But it is valuable one.

HAMLET

The King, having hastily called up his 'wisest friends,' i.e. gathered a few members of his Council round him (and being certainly now attended by his guards) has Hamlet brought before him, to be dispatched at once to England. Against force and authority there is no appeal, and Hamlet makes none. When he is gone we learn that on reaching England he is to be put to death.

Another short scene; and this succession of them, by contrast with the long ones gone before, helps to give us a sense of events now speeding on.

Q2's economical stage direction

Enter King, and two or three.

we may, I think, legitimately translate into his appearance attended by such of his Council - of his 'wisest friends'—as could be hastily 'called up' to approve of what he means to do.¹ He has

¹ Fr's *Enter King*, which turns the following speech into a soliloquy, is, of course, inadmissible. Claudius' private thoughts and plans we are to know later; these are the reasons of state he gives to his Councillors. Modern editions are apt to have *Enter King, attended*—which is a little too vague. Dover Wilson gives us *The King seated at a table on the dais with 'two or three' councillors of state*. It thus implies a setting upon the inner stage at the Globe, there would hardly be time (between the closet-scene and now) to arrange it. But a more important objection is that while such 'a discovery of the King in Council'—or something very like it—will lend importance to the scene itself, it destroys the fluidity of movement which gives us a Claudius, at this juncture, coming to no halt till he has rid himself of his enemy. There are the checks of the 'prayer' and the 'closet' scenes; but, these apart, and to compensate for them, the action from the crisis of the play-scene to Hamlet's departure is—metaphorically and literally—'on foot'. The sense of this will be appreciably lessened by even a short passage for Claudius 'seated at a table.' The mere physical aspect of a play's action can furnish as be as significant as the dialogue itself.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

regained some outward equanimity at least:

How dangerous is it that this man goes loose!
Yet must not we put the strong law on him:
He's loved of the distracted multitude,
Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes;
And where 'tis so, the offender's scourge is weigh'd,
But never the offence. To bear all smooth and even,
This sudden sending him away must seem
Deliberate pause. .

It is the first we hear of the distracted multitude and their love—soon, moreover, to be fastened on Laertes. We may even suspect that the idea has only now struck Claudius—and Shakespeare! It is none the worse a one for that. Did the murder of their colleague not move them, fear of the mob is ever wakeful in the Conciliar mind.

Then, with

Enter Rosencrantz and all the rest.

the King finds himself surrounded and supported by courtiers and guards besides, panoplied in authority and power. And Hamlet has been securely caught this time:

But where is he
Without, my lord; guarded, to know your pleasure.
Bring him before us.
Ho, Guildenstern! bring in my lord.

It is the haling of a prisoner before his judge.¹

¹ Once again, stage directions are in question. Most modern editions follow the Folio with a simple *Enter Rosencrantz*; some add . . . *and others*, and, of their own accord, commit themselves later to a nondescript 'attendants.' But the hint to the producer in Q2's *Enter Rosencraus and all the rest* was to bring on the full strength of the company, surround the King with every safeguard and give

H A M L E T

From their last encounter, from the sight of the mimic poisoning, it was Claudius who fled, leaving Hamlet ecstatically triumphant. And we have had fine verbal displays from him since; in the rating of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the refusal to kill the King at prayer, in his moral victory over his mother. But the quieter 'counter-action' has proved by so much the more efficient that here he is, captive and disarmed, the sword suspended such a short while since above his unconscious enemy in Guildenstern's safe keeping, a dozen others ready to be drawn against him, and branded as a dangerous maniac before the world.

We are half-way through the story. And not by words, but in this single picture, the situation and its irony (the harvest to date) is summed up and made eloquent. Here is Claudius, the grieved father and merciful king, sympathy and approval surrounding him, and before him stands the culprit, the homicide, Hamlet. And while we listen, with the Councillors and courtiers, to the King's curt questions and Hamlet's oracular replies (he has

- - - - -

to Hamlet's banishment all possible importance. A significant and striking dramatic effect. Dover Wilson gives us

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and others enter.

and prefers Q2's

Ho, (actually 'How') bring in the Lord.

to F1's

Hoa, Guildenstern? Bring in my Lord.

This last may not be the logical sequel to *and all the rest* (though even that 'all' still excludes Hamlet's guards), but it gives us Guildenstern in personal charge, as he would be, of the distinguished prisoner, and carrying the surrendered sword.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

his 'madness' for defence still; it is gladly allowed him) we know, as they do not, that all this is beside the point. For Claudius cares no more about the dead Polonius at this juncture than Hamlet does; and it is in the latent thoughts of the two as they face each other that the drama lies. At the crisis of the play-scene it seemed as if the struggle would surge into the open, but here each is back in his ambush again. We shall guess at Hamlet's thought, when we hear that so innocently astonished

For England?

—since behind it, and the blithely reiterated

But, come; for England. . . . Come, for England!

with which he beckons after him the schoolfellows turned gaolers, will echo for us his recent grim forebodings of treachery in the 'letters sealed,' and the mandate marshalling him to knavery. The remembrance should sharpen too our questioning of Claudius' gentle

Hamlet, this deed, for thine especial safety,
Which we do tender as we dearly grieve
For that which thou hast done, must send thee hence
With fiery quickness . . .

and his so suspiciously kindly air.

To Claudius' inmost mind we have till now been sparingly and, as it were, but grudgingly admitted; fitly so, for he does not love exploring it himself. Shakespeare has let him keep up appearances. Except for a solitary (and it may be a subsequently added) aside, not till *The Murder of Gonzago* shook him to the depths was there any avowal of guilt. This apart, we have seen him as Gertrude and his

HAMLET

Court see him, with Hamlet's jealous hatred to be discounted, with only the Ghost's word for it that he is other than he seems. He is, moreover, one of those most clever scoundrels; he never lies when he need not and lets the straight road carry him just as far as it will. This dispatch to England; patently, for Hamlet's sake, it is the right thing to do. And the game seems so certainly in his hands that he cannot deny himself a little fun with his victim:

For England?

Ay, Hamlet.

Good

So is it, if thou knew'st our purposes.

Hamlet, as we know, suspects something of them, and is an adept himself at equivocation:

I see a cherub that sees them.

So, for a moment, the two stand there, as if mutually enjoying some secret joke to the confounding of the lookers-on.

They part. Claudius is left alone; the mask comes off, his mind is revealed; Hamlet's intuition is verified:

And England, if my love thou hold'st at aught,

. . . thou may'st not coldly set

Our sovereign process, which imports at full,

By letters conjuring to that effect,

The present death of Hamlet—Do it, England;

For like the hectic in my blood he rages,

And thou must cure me. Till I know 'tis done,

Howe'er my haps, my joys were ne'er begun

With which conventional full-close this chapter of the story and the struggle ends; and another is foreshadowed, with the 'counter action' definitely in the ascendant and Hamlet on the defensive.

A SECOND MOVEMENT

While this is passing at Elsinore, Fortinbras and his army are traversing Danish territory near by. On his way to the harbour, Hamlet encounters one of its officers. He reflects upon the contrast between Fortinbras' confident march towards victory and glory, and his own present defeat.

Enter Fortinbras and his army over the stage.

—it is again one of Shakespeare's well-trying effects of contrast. Against the treacherous King and his Court are set the frank young soldier and his 'lawless resolute'; he is on his way with them to prove his 'unimproved mettle.' We have heard enough of him already for the contrast to make its effect. Incidentally the courtesy of his speech belies his and his army's earlier reputation:

Go, captain, from me greet the Danish king,
Tell him that, by his licence, Fortinbras
Craves the conveyance of a promis'd march
Over his kingdom. You know the rendezvous.
If that his majesty would aught with us,
We shall express our duty in his eye,
And let him know so.

Here then, we are meant to feel, is a leader who is disciplining both himself and his men.

But the contrast is to be intensified. For hardly has the martial little pageant passed than

Enter Hamlet, Rosencraus, etc . . .

—Hamlet the doomed exile, disarmed and under guard.¹

¹ This does not, I think, stretch Q2's summary, etc., too far. He is treated with the respect due to a prince. He is under arrest nevertheless.

HAMLET

By just so much he misses an encounter with his spiritual rival. They are not to meet till Fortinbras, 'with conquest come from Poland,' will pass this way again to find him a conqueror too, and dead. He detains instead the returning captain, who does not know this prisoner for what he is—they politely 'Sir' each other as equals¹—and, in answer to his questions, tells him that

We go to gain a little patch of ground
That hath in it no profit but the name.
To pay five ducats, five, I would not farm it.
Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole
A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee . . .

Yet it appears that two armies are to 'debate the question of this straw' to the death. The captain goes his way; and the stage is cleared for Hamlet's commentary:

How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge! . . .²

¹ The intention is stressed in their farewell

I humbly thank you, sir.
God be wi' you, sir.

with Rosencrantz'

Will't please you go, my lord?
coming immediately after.

² 'the stage is cleared'—quite undisguisedly.

Rosencrantz. Will't please you go, my lord?

Hamlet. I'll be with you straight. Go a little before.

-- and leave me to soliloquise'

Shakespeare was not interested, it would seem, in nice stagecraft for its own sake. Still, he seldom, in his maturity, takes refuge in such simplicities as this. Its verisimilitude will pass, *just* pass. Is his mind so occupied with the *matter* of the scene, that his sense of the theatre is in momentary abeyance?

The Folio omits the soliloquy and the rest of Hamlet's

A SECOND MOVEMENT

He is to pass out of the action for a while. That would be reason enough for overlaying our most recent sight of him, masked in his madness, with a juster one. But we are to be given, besides, a view of Hamlet which we have hardly had before, a judgment at parting. And in the light of it we shall look on him a little differently when he returns.

He has intimately revealed himself to us more than once. But till now he has only once measured himself against any standard but his own; when, upon the brink of the ordeal of the play-scene, he made Horatio's calm strength the text of some wistful self-reproach. That adventure is over. He has thrown away the fruits

- - - - -

share in the scene. If the play had to be shortened, here, at a stroke, were several minutes saved; and, though the character suffers, the story hardly does.

With scenery's scene-division destroying continuity of action, it soon became customary in the theatre to omit Fortinbras and his army too; the entire scene disappears. But upon Shakespeare's stage this would not do. There some bridge was wanted, which would both separate and link the two scenes, one dealing with the death of Polonius and the banishing of Hamlet, the other with Ophelia's madness, Polonius by then in his grave and Hamlet far away. Besides which Shakespeare wants, I think, to keep Hamlet's 'madness' and Ophelia's madness apart.

Dover Wilson (in the *Manuscript of Shakespeare's Hamlet*, p. 31), arguing that the soliloquy cannot be, as some critics have held, a late addition to the play, says, 'The Fortinbras scene was patently written in order to give occasion to the soliloquy.' This, I venture to think, goes too far. Hamlet's appearance can certainly be called the most important thing in the scene. But, apart from the technical need for some bridge scene here, the dramatic effect made by Fortinbras and his army as a contrast to Claudius and his Court is important in itself.

H A M L E T

of it; and he now stands contemplating Fortinbras of the 'strong hand and terms compulsatory,' seeing himself in that light as nakedly as men do upon the morrow of a failure.

His self-indictment is the bitterer for its cold detachment:

What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unus'd. . . .

He has not left it unused. Yet to what use has he put it? To fostering

some craven scruple,
Of thinking too precisely on the event;
A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward. . . .

—but even in the misery of defeat he knows he is no coward. The merciless truth suddenly rings out in the baffled.

I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do';
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't. . . .

He does not know. And if god-like reason cannot tell him why, yet will not let him act in ignorance, what is it but a mockery and a curse? Therefore:

from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

Upon which negation of all he has been and believed in until now, not envious any longer of 'blood and judgment . . . well commingled,' but

A SECOND MOVEMENT

just of brute capacity for deeds of blood, we part from him. A changed and hardened man; yet not so changed. For even while he thinks that at last he is facing facts he is ignoring them, confident that he has not merely 'cause and will' but 'strength and means' to act—in this very moment of his helplessness and defeat! The idea and not the thing itself, that is what still counts with him.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

THIS will take us to the end of the play. The King's 'counter-action' is the main motive force; Hamlet, till the last scene, an all-but-passive figure.

Three scenes interpose between his departure and return. Before examining them in detail, it may be worth while to note their relation to the action as a whole. Shakespeare, as we have seen, carefully confines this to Elsinore.¹ We do not travel with the story's travellers; neither to Paris with Laertes nor to Norway with the ambassadors, nor even towards England now with Hamlet. And it will be to the good to be quit of him and the strain of his troubles for a time—or really we might begin to weary of them. Yet the distraction should not be complete. For he and they are the marrow of the play, and the continuity of our interest in them must not be definitely broken.

In these three scenes the double demand is fulfilled and its conflict reconciled. Ophelia's

¹ See p. 22 *et seq.* One must be wary of imputing dramatic motives to Shakespeare. But I think this 'carefully' may be justified. With a continuing need of little 'bridge-scenes' for the spacing out of the action, the most convenient, and—for most Elizabethan dramatists, Shakespeare among them—the customary thing would be to transport us to wherever the material for one happened at the moment to be. But several other of the plays of this period—*Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, *Othello*—show a tendency to concentrate the action in some single city or district, at any rate. If the story lends itself to such treatment this does give a certain stability to its framework. And in *Hamlet* this modified 'unity of place' is certainly turned to definite dramatic account.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

lyric madness strikes a new note; but we are conscious of Hamlet's hand in it, and of something like pretence with him turned tragic reality for her. Horatio is there to remind us of him. Laertes' frontal attack and his frank cry for vengeance, suddenly detonating, contrast sharply with Hamlet's subtleties; but it is against Hamlet that they are soon deflected. And even while the plot against him is hatching we are warned of his return. So the matter of the scenes is not merely incidental, but rooted in the story, knit together in a certain unity and by a close continuity of action. And it makes firm passage across that always difficult interval between a play's mid-crisis and its final climax and catastrophe.

The death of her father at the hands of her lover unhinges Ophelia's mind. Laertes, returned from France and believing the King to blame, raises a rebellion to avenge Polonius. The King courageously faces it, and calms him and proceeds to tell him where the guilt really lies.

Enter the Queen, Horatio and a Gentleman . . .

—this scene and the three that follow it run to some length, 760 lines and more between them. Except from the last, Hamlet is absent, and even in that, his cause is not in question. We have, then, a fresh range, an exempted interplay, of character and incident, and the stagecraft of it repays close analysis.

The Queen's opening lines—

I will not speak with her. . . What would she have?

HAMLET

—are keyed to the last we heard of her; she is still nerve-racked and guilt-ridden, and incapable of facing fresh trouble. Ophelia is not named. We guess at her from that

She speaks much of her father . . .

But there is a sense of grave and uncanny calamity in this very omission of her name.

The Folio thriftily turns over to Horatio the Gentleman's speech describing her. It asks skilful and discreet speaking, certainly, and a minor actor might well not do it full credit. But this is to rob Horatio of the characteristic quiet in which he listens. His considered comment:

'Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew
Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds . . .

and the concluding

Let her come in.

the Folio also gives to the Queen; and modern editors leave her this last, on the ground, presumably, that she should give the order, not he.¹ But I think the Quarto's intention is clear. The Gentleman stands respectfully aloof. Horatio speaks his two lines of prudent counsel in the Queen's ear. She is still too distressed to make more than a gesture of assent, which he translates for her into words. To give the order he leaves her isolated on the outer stage, and her misery finds vent and relief in the plaintive sing-song of

To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss:
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.

¹ The Folio only gives it her as an integral part of the gift of the lines taken from Horatio in exchange for the Gentleman's speech.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

Then she pulls herself together to receive Ophelia.

But Ophelia is already there—if we follow the Quarto; and again, I think, the dramatic intention is plain. The editors not only follow the Folio in politely postponing her appearance till the Queen has quite finished speaking, but of their own accord they have the Gentleman go out to fetch her and formally usher her in. That is far too proper and sane. The Folio only has

Enter Ophelia distracted.

The original intention is, surely, that she should dart through the door when it is opened and stand for a moment or so gazing at the Queen, whom she does not in her madness recognise.¹ Hence her

Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?

and its pathetic irony. Where, indeed, in this haggard, fearful woman, is the 'beauteous majesty' that has been the cause of all this ill?

We may even here take a hint from Q1 and its

Enter Ofelia playing on a Lute, and her haire downe singing.

Having had her way and been admitted to the presence of this disappointingly unknown lady, she becomes absorbed in her lute and her singing.²

¹ That 'she is importunate, indeed distract' is the first thing we have heard of her. Shakespeare and his audience would imagine unseen attendants in some ante-room, barring her way. The King later on implies that his 'Switzers' are—or ought to be—there.

² The dramatic point of the lute is that you must stand—or, better, sit—still if you are to attempt to play it. Modern Ophelias have an ineffective habit of drifting vaguely about the stage. A lute is at least an admirable anchor.

H A M L E T

The three¹ stand helplessly gazing at her, and listening to the 'conceit upon her father,' with its

He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;
At his head a grass-green turf;
At his heels a stone. . . .

The King comes quietly in. She sings on unheeding:

White his shroud as the mountain snow .
Larded with sweet flowers;
Which bewept to the grave did go
With true-love showers.

And from this her poor mind travels to a perverted mirroring of the tragedy of her love for Hamlet:

To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.

Then up he rose, and donn'd his clothes,
And dupp'd the chamber door,
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more.

Wiseacre warnings against that manner of undoing could not save her from this one. The merry bit of bawdry which follows:

By Gis and by Saint Charity,
Alack and fie for shame!
Young men will do't, if they come to't;
By cock, they are to blame.

Quoth she, Before you tumbled me
You promised me to wed.
So would I ha' done, by yonder sun, .
An thou hadst not come to my bed.

¹ Or, if the Gentleman has gone, the Queen and Horatio.
138

A THIRD MOVEMENT

may remind her listeners (and us) that it was with such humour Hamlet so brutally bespattered her as they sat watching the play. Here is its echo now upon her pitiably innocent lips. Then it is as if she tried to re-assemble scattered fragments of the thoughts she last controlled :

I hope all will be well. We must be patient. But I
cannot choose but weep, to think they should lay him i'
the cold ground! My brother shall know of it . . .

For the rest, she addresses phantoms—

Come, my watch! Good-night ladies; good-night,
sweet ladies; good-night, good-night.

and is gone. The kindly Claudius sends Horatio
after :

Follow her close; give her good watch, I pray
you

and is left alone with the Queen.

Gertrude is silent. She has not spoken since,
at his coming, she appealed to him with a

Alas! he here, my lord.

—for this guiltless suffering confounds her.
Claudius can always find words.

His twenty-line speech that follows is technically
remarkable. It sets the scene in appropriate time
and circumstance. Polonius' death and Hamlet's
departure are definitely relegated to the past; the
recent past, for

we have done but greenly
In hugger-mugger to inter him . . .

HAMLET

(the implication is of haste as well as secrecy), yet not so recent but that Laertes

is in secret come from France;
Feeds on his wonder, keeps himself in clouds,
And wants not buzzers to infect his ear
With pestilent speeches of his father's death . . .

—the 'in secret' a subtle stroke of imprecision. It sounds—only sounds—as if the tragic news had brought him from France; but Claudius does not know how long he has been here. Now, had Shakespeare put all this in its more obvious place, linked it directly to Hamlet's parting soliloquy, made it an explanatory prelude to Ophelia's appearance, it would only have been of bare practical use. But by placing it here, the lyric madness is left to be a vibrant sequel to the hard, intellectual drive, the dry sanity, of the soliloquy. It is, moreover, a thing so moving in itself as to banish other things from our mind. Therefore, in this anti-climax which follows, we the more passively accept these incongruous time suggestions. The speech itself is of the very stuff of anti-climax:

O Gertrude, Gertrude!
When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions.

Just such unlooked-for, inscrutable, addition to evil it is that will set us brooding, as Gertrude silently broods, or, with Claudius, gloomily summing up errors and chances. And it serves besides to separate Ophelia's pathos from Laertes' anger; they are to be thrown, a little later, into sharp contrast.

Now comes

A noise within.

A T H

and the Queen's
again.¹ But the King
when his conscience
scared 'messenger's',
bent upon amends for him
of a rabble that 'call him

cry 'Choose we; Lay
Caps, hands and tongues, applaud
'Laertes shall be king, Laertes king.

Not that Laertes proves so well
Once in the royal presence he seen.
be free of his 'rabble,' who, for them,
become biddable enough. The messenger
niloquent

Save yourself, my lord;
The ocean, overpeering of his list,
Flats not the flats with more impetuous haste
Than young Laertes . . .

and the crash proclaiming that

The doors are broke.

resolve themselves, in fact, into a hubbub in the
ante-room and half a dozen fierce speeches from a
passionate young man with whom Claudius very
easily deals. The 'giant-like' rebellion is still-
born. It is so for a dramatically good reason.
Here as elsewhere Shakespeare stops short of
enlarging the play's action beyond the bounds of
personal conflict. We heard at the outset the tale
of Denmark's dangers from abroad, and have seen

¹ Here again the Folio knits the action a little closer than
does Q2, by giving her the usefully quick, nervous,

Alack, what noyse is this?

and eliminating the King's 'Attend'—his call to someone
in the ante-room.

his army march
bellion—fruit of the
brought into the very
. For if once these
the more intimate ones
son, their intensity and
ed, however, that this rebel-
wings like a thunder-sheet—is
convincing.¹

part of the play's story is told mainly by
audius, upon his brother's death, and, it would
let's absence at Wittenberg, has assumed the
his possession of it has been apparently ratified by
over which we first see him presiding. He has
'elected' by them that Hamlet can speak of his

Popped in between the election and my hopes.

. among them he finds the 'wisest friends' upon whose
support he relies when it comes to sending Hamlet to
England.

But Hamlet, we have heard, is

lov'd of the distracted multitude
Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes.

—and he (and Shakespeare, will have had, I fancy, this love
in mind when speaking, a scene later, at the very moment of
banishment, of having not only the 'will' but the 'power'
to turn the tables on the King. And now the multitude,
the 'rabble,' have suddenly given their hearts to another
handsome, gallant, and much-wronged young man. This
may seem a mere dramatic convenience, and it is one. But
it illustrates also their folly and instability; and, for other
strokes to the picture, we have the King's contempt for them,
the Queen's

false Danish dogs.

(note the implication that she is, by birth, a foreigner to
Denmark; such things slip out at such a moment), Laertes'
desire to be quit of their compromising help, and their own
facile conversion from wolves to sheep. Finally they fade

A THIRD MOVEMENT

Claudius deals with Laertes very skilfully indeed.
The quiet dignity, the cool courage:

Let him go, Gertrude, do not fear our person:
There's such divinity doth hedge a king,
That treason can but peep to what it would .

and the old caressing use of the name, such
reproach in its soft cadence now:

away, no one even troubling to dismiss them. It is certainly
not from among them that Laertes himself is to make choice
of 'the wisest friends' he will, the *ae*, as the very phrase tells
us, are meant to be men akin to the King's own councillors.

Such strokes and hints the Lear's than actors could be
trusted to colour in and elaborate: their implications would
be plain to them. A Claudius would instinctively respond
to the outrage of the claim.

Choose we, Laertes shall be king . . .

and the messenger is inevitably accurate the '*ae*' -
though, indeed, the *ae* does it for him. And a Laertes
would know just how colour to temper his.

Sirs, stand you all without. I pray you, give me
leave. . . I thank you, keep the door.

Small matters; but, if they stay unadjusted, picture and
characters will lack their exact value.

An Elizabethan audience, moreover, could co-ordinate
this and other such fragments, and from their knowledge of
kindred actualities fill in the gaps for themselves, and so
make a sufficiently definite political background for the play.
A king and his Privy Council, a dispossessed heir sent into
banishment in excitable populace, a rebellious young
noble, they evaluated and related them each to other
without thinking, for it was a familiar's herne of things. To
us it is not. The political story of Hamlet is a sentence left
with half the words missing. Shakespeare purposely left it
so that it might not encumber the more intimate theme.
But with no conjecture of the missing words the others must
inevitably lack something of their sense. Dover Wilson, both
in his edition and his separate study of the play, has dealt
very illuminatingly with this aspect of it.

HAMLET

What is the cause, Laertes,
That thy rebellion looks so giant-like?
... Tell me, Laertes,
Why thou art thus incens'd?

—what better defence against windy, over-reaching
wrath?¹ What better counter to the fierce

Where is my father?
than the honest, uncompromising

Devil.

He encourages the young man not merely to
'demand his fill,' but to storm his fill also
And to such stuff as

To hell, allegiance! Vows to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation

... I'll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father

responds only with a

Who shall say you?

nor even allows the vaunting response

My will, not all he will!

to draw from him an ironic snarl. And he has
reduced his rebel to a readiness—at least, to listen
to reason, when the rabble voices are again heard

¹ The old carousing use of the name—we may not
recall it, but the instruction to the actor to repeat the
trick of that first

And now, Laertes, what's the news with you?

What is't, Laertes?

What would'st thou beg, Laertes?

is plain

A THIRD MOVEMENT

at the door—awed voices now!—and Ophelia reappears.

She stands silent; she does not know him. We shall remember their pretty, familiar parting. This is how they meet again.¹

There is every difference between this and our recent sight of her, between that phantom of a happy girl singing to her lute and this subdued, silent figure. She has been to the garden to gather herbs and flowers—half-way, so to speak, to the meadow where she is soon to meet her death. And she now begins a solemn sort of mimicry of the funeral her father was denied. She chants:

They bore him barefac'd on the bier;
Hey non nonny, nonny hev nonny;
And in his grave rain'd many a tear . . .

and bends over the bier, which only she can see, with a

Fare you well, my dove!

She reproaches the rest of them for not singing too:

You must sing, 'a-down a-down,' Are you call him a-down-a.²

She ceremoniously scatters her rosemary and rue, and distributes it and the flowers to her fellow-

¹ 'This is how they meet again'—in terms of the play, that is to say; and (once more) these are the only effective terms. Shakespeare does not underline this, for that would only raise the question of its likelihood; and we might then recollect that Laertes had 'in secret come from France' and ask: how could he not have seen her and already known of her madness? As it is the effect is made that he sees her thus for the first time.

² Dover Wilson's reading.

H A M L E T

mourners. Then the poor brain loses hold for a moment even of its own fantasy, and she carols out a

For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy.

but recollects, and chants for a second psalm :

And will he not come again?

And will he not come again?

No, no, he is dead,

Go to thy death-bed,

He never will come again.

His beard was as white as snow

All flaxen was his poll,

He is gone, he is gone,

And we cast away moan,

God ha' mercy on his soul!

adding reverently

And of all Christian souls, I pray God.

She cannot quite make out, I think, why they are not ready to follow with her to the grave. But if they will not go she must. So she bids them a solemn

God be wi' ye!

and departs head bowed, hands folded, as quietly as she came; and the rough crowd at the door stand silent to let her pass.¹

¹ Whatever the origin and value of *Q1* as a text, we may take it, I think, that *Enter Ophelia playing on a lute and her have done singing* is a genuinely Shakespearian stage direction and that the later *Enter Ophelia as before* merely means 'still mad.' She will not be encumbered now with her lute; and though it is a small point—the flowers are pretty certainly real, not imaginary.

The mimicking of a funeral ceremony is, I believe, to be justified by the text. At first Ophelia is spoken of as 'importunate and distract.' The second entry is, to begin

A THIRD MOVEMENT

To this main melody of the action (so to call it) have been added the grace-notes of the imagery of the flowers; rosemary for remembrance, pansies for thoughts, fennel and columbines:

. . . there's rue for you; and here's some for me; we may call it herb of grace o' Sundays. O! you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy; I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died. . . .

And Laertes' part must be noted. His confidence of a moment since turns to bewildered helplessness:

O rose of May!

Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!

But he can win no answer from her:

O heavens! is't possible a young maid's wits
Should be as mortal as an old man's life . . .

—for indeed he might be speaking to the dead. He has lost her too, and even more tragically; and, as she goes, he sums all up in the accusing:

Do you see this, O God?

—with, a silent one. Its tones, in contrast, at least, to 'Saint Valentine's day'—are grave and slow; and it is the first line of the first one—

They bore him barefaced on the bier . . .

—that gives, as I take it, the cue for the action intended. And the distribution of the herbs and flowers was an ordinary funeral custom. Carew Hazlitt, in *Popular Antiquities of Great Britain* (1870, Vol. 2, p. 175), quotes Misson ' . . . when the Funeral Procession is ready to set out they nail up the coffin and a Servant presents the Company with sprigs of Rosemary, everyone takes a sprig and carries it in his hand, till the Body is put into the Grave, at which time they all throw in their sprigs after it.' There is ample authority besides for the use of other flowers.

HAMLET

But his grief has left him malleable, and the King is quick to the advantage. Sympathy itself—

Go but apart,
Make choice of whom your wisest friends you will,
And they shall hear and judge 'twixt you and me:
If by direct or by collateral hand
They find us touch'd, we will our kingdom give,
Our crown, our life and all that we call ours,
To you in satisfaction . . .

—he leads the young man away, and the rest disperse. The rebellion is forgotten.

Horatio receives news of Hamlet's return.

While the King and Laertes are conferring elsewhere, Horatio hears of seafaring men who have letters for him. These prove to be from

the ambassador that was bound for England.

and that is Hamlet, thus anonymously returned. From the reading of one letter, we learn the story—and incidentally that the seafaring men (who may thus look a little apprehensive, perhaps, in these royal and judicatory surroundings) are pirates. They have both attacked and rescued Hamlet:

They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy,
but they knew what they did; I am to do a good turn
for them. Let the King have the letters I have sent;
and repair thou to me with as much haste as thou
wouldst thy death. . . . These good fellows will bring
thee where I am. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hold
their course for England: of them I have much to tell
thee . . .

It is a scene of thirty-five lines only; its use to prepare Hamlet's return and save cumbersome

A THIRD MOVEMENT

explanations when he does appear. But there are signs that Shakespeare means to give it a slight dramatic colouring of its own. Q₂ begins it with

Enter Horatio and others.

What others? There is only need for an attendant, to be sent to fetch the sailors. The 'others' are then, I fancy, meant to be another Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or the like, keeping a polite watch on the King's behalf upon Horatio, upon Hamlet's friend. It is noticeable that, though they know who he is ('but they knew what they did'), the pirates do not name Hamlet. 'The ambassador that was bound to England' would be hint enough to the eavesdroppers; but this could be whispered. Horatio, of course, reads the letter to himself, and, departing with the pirates, only says

Come, I will give you way for these your letters,
And do't the speedier that you may direct me
To him from whom you brought them.

But (as we hear later) they do not—very wisely—go themselves to the King; the letters are given to one Claudio, and by him again to the 'messenger' who does deliver them. A phrase in the letter itself ('these good fellows will bring thee where I am') suggests a hiding-place; and, till he was safely back at Court, Hamlet might well want to keep his whereabouts a secret, lest Claudius should have him privily murdered. It will be quite possible—the watchful courtiers at one side of the stage; Horatio and the pirates, conscious of their attention, at the other—no express enough of this in the scene's acting, to extract it from the dialogue, with no more than legitimate by-play

HAMLET

added.¹ And whether or no Horatio is being watched, the Pirates certainly make their mission as mysterious as possible.

The King has just proved his own innocence of Polonius' death when the news reaches him that Hamlet has returned. Laertes rejoices at the chance of vengeance thus offered him. The King devises a means for it. The Queen comes to tell them that Ophelia, in her madness, has drowned herself.

The King and Laertes return, still in talk. The suggestion is—it keeps the action going—that there has been no break in their parley. The revelation of Hamlet's guilt we have not heard; Shakespeare does not want to over-multiply occasions for angry outbreaks by Laertes. And as to the 'wisest friends' who were to 'hear and judge'—that matter has gone the way of the rebellion—technically, rather in the interests of compression; but Claudius can do his own persuading, and it is clear that his smooth tongue has already made good play:

Now must your conscience my acquittance seal,
And you must put me in your heart for friend,
Sith you have heard, and with a knowing ear,
That he which hath your noble father slain
Pursu'd my life

¹ F1 begins the scene

Enter Horatio with an attendant.

(and most modern editors substantially follow). This is of a piece with the rest of its economising of actors; and it may well be that the Quarto reading and its business—if I am right about it—was not thought important enough to preserve. It is not important. But the play is full of such superfluous touches, which yet enrich its dramatic life and, as in this case, rescue a scene from mere utility.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

Remaining doubts he flatters away. Why was not Hamlet put on public trial?

The Queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks; and for myself—
My virtue or my plague, be it either which—
She's so conjunctive to my life and soul,
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her. . . .

To have your sovereign so confess himself to you bespeaks intimate friendship indeed! An even likelier reason follows, and a darker confidence is hinted at:

ye must not think
That we are made of stuff so flat and dull
That we can let our beard be shook with danger
And think it pastime. You shortly shall hear more—

Upon which—shortly indeed!—news comes; but not the expected happy news of Hamlet's death. He is alive and back in Denmark.

Since we already know it we can the better mark the different effects of the surprise upon the two of them; the King's perplexity (and at the queer mockery of the letter, so mysteriously delivered, the sense of lurking danger stirs in him again); Laertes' joy:

But let him come;
It warms the very sickness in my heart,
That I shall live and tell him to his teeth,
'Thus diddest thou.'

But that prospect does not suit Claudius at all; for what has not Hamlet to tell in return? We perceive his mind momentarily fumbling; it is for the first time:

If it be so, Laertes,
As how should it be so? how otherwise? . . .

H A M L E T

Then he sees his way clear, and is soon circum-spectly leading his tamed young rebel along it.

In the scales against much masterly compression, however, we now find Shakespeare dispensing a hundred lines and more for the winning of Laertes to a murderous plot against Hamlet, and lavishing in the process abundant and very variously relevant talk about Lamord the Norman and his horsemanship, Laertes' own skill in fence and Hamlet's jealousy of it with, besides, some philosophising by Claudius, which comes, at first blush, a little strangely from him.

Truly the thing could be more thriftily¹ done; but its amplitude can be accounted for. Claudius must advance cautiously, he would feel, towards the very unpleasant proposal he has in mind, and he habitually moves behind a smoke-screen of words. Will this exuberant young man consent to forgo an overt, a spectacular revenge? And, say he can be persuaded to agree to the duel in the guise of a fencing match, will he—for he is a gallant fellow—be a party to the 'little shuffling' that is to leave him with the 'unbated sword,' which will be Hamlet's death?

But the management of Laertes here is really masterly; and Claudius, the arch-diplomat, can-

¹ Dover Wilson (agreeing with Verity) scents something like topical allusion in the talk of the horsemanship, an indirect reference to Southampton's prowess in this kind. If this be so—and it has something the air of being so—it is another instance (cf. the talk of the 'eyrie of children') of Shakespeare's skill at dragging in such things where they will do his play least harm, though we cannot say they do it none. But the passage survives in the Folio. Did its interest, then, prove more than topical, did it justify itself dramatically? Or, a further possibility (privately suggested to me by Dr. R. B. McKerrow); was it never a part of the acted text?

A THIRD MOVEMENT

not but enjoy—and be ready to linger over—the exercise of his craft. First, we have tonic to vanity in a subtly reinforced dose of praise. The eulogy of the horsemanship of the gentleman of Normandy makes the account of *his* praise of Laertes the swordsman the sweeter hearing:

He made confession of you,
And gave you such a masterly report
For art and exercise in your defence,
And for your rapier most especially,
That he cried out, 'twould be a sight indeed
If one could match you; the scrimers of their nation,
He swore, had neither motion, guard, nor eye,
If you oppos'd them. . . .

And talk of Hamlet's envy of such skill is a last drop to the mixture, and the sweetest of all.

Youthful complacency is then ruffled by the suddenly distrustful

Laertes, was your father dear to you?
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,
A face without a heart?

And a dozen sententious lines follow—wide of the mark for Laertes in their talk of the mortality of love and the need to seize the moment as it passes—which have, indeed, for an immediate dramatic excuse only the stoking of his impatience to come to the point. Shakespeare makes them serve also for a rather vague revelation of a Claudius grown conscious that Gertrude's love is lost to him (he knows not why, but, since the scene in her closet, we know), too vague, one must own, to be very effective. Then a touch sets the fume ablaze:

But to the quick of the ulcer:
Hamlet comes back; what would you undertake
To show yourself your father's son in deed
More than in words?

To cut his throat i' the church.

H A M L E T

That is the ripe mood. And the King's bland and (for us) admirably ambiguous response—

No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarise;
Revenge should have no bounds.

—should steady him in it. The young man is well in hand. Success indeed betters expectation; for not merely is the trick of the unbated sword embraced, but, say, Laertes,

for that purpose I'll anoint my sword.
I bought an unction of a mountebank,
So mortal that but dip a knife in it
Where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare,
Collected from all simples that have virtue
Under the moon, can save the thing from death
That is but scratched withal. . . .

Poison! How will Claudius, of all people, respond to that? Interesting to watch him first play with the notion, a little reluctantly; then, with that feline

Soft; let me see . . .

yield—once more!—to its fascination. For even so must he have looked when he pictured to himself his brother sleeping in the orchard; even so, perhaps, he may have turned as—at another rumour in his ante-room—he here turns with a tender

How now, sweet queen!

She comes with the tale of Ophelia's death, its candid beauty in sharp contrast to the secret wickedness brewing. The 'fantastic garlands' themselves:

Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them . . .

A THIRD MOVEMENT

seem an innocent reproach to the unction which

no cataplasm so rare,
Collected from all simples that have virtue
Under the moon . . .

can counteract.

The speech fulfils divers ends. It gives actuality to Ophelia's unseen death. We have seen her sitting singing to her lute, and back from the garden with flowers in her hands. We now hear how

There, on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indu'd
Unto that element; but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

—which matches in vividness our last sight of her living. And the beauty and pity of it incidentally help to rescue Gertrude in our eyes from the degradation of Hamlet's painting of her

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty . . .

with the much more to that purpose in the closet-scene. She is to have no further very prominent part in the play. We shall remember her as well as Ophelia by this.

The effect upon Laertes is interesting, too. He has just, for vengeance' sake, committed himself to

H A M L E T

an act of callous treachery. After the first shock he listens quietly, and has no more to say when the story ends than

Alas, then she is drown'd.

The Queen's speech has been a-brim with tears ;
and she now—upon that

Drown'd, drown'd !

—breaks into a passion of weeping. Such grief
and the solace of it are not for him. Still,

It is our trick ; nature her custom holds,
Let shame say what it will . . .

and in spite of him the tears flow. He is not
quite so satanic as he thinks himself.

Hamlet, purged of his 'madness,' returning with Horatio to Elsinore, pauses by the way to talk to an old man digging a grave. It proves to be Ophelia's, and he hears himself cursed by Laertes as the cause of her death. His love for her surges up again ; he cries his grief aloud. At which seeming mockery, Laertes flies at his throat. They are parted. He is evidently as mad as ever. He leaves them to think so ; for how can he explain ?

To the contrast between the ugliness of the poison-plot and the innocence of Ophelia's death succeeds another, between the sophistications of the Court and the simplicity of

Enter two clowns.

Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully
seeks her own salvation ?

I tell thee she is ; and therefore make her grave

A THIRD MOVEMENT

straight; the crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial.¹

And, while he gets some refreshing fun out of them, Shakespeare turns these two to more than comic use. They are ignorant hinds, with their 'argal' and their '*se offendendo*'; but their perversion of an abstruse legal argument—

Here lies the water; good: here stands the man; good: if the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he, nill he, he goes; mark you that; but if the water come to him, and drown him, he drowns not himself: argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life.

—is little more ridiculous than the argument itself,² and they pierce through verbiage and pretence to the heart of the present business with

Will you ha' the truth on't? If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out of Christian burial.

Why, there thou sayest; and the more pity that great folk should have countenance in this world to drown or hang themselves more than their even Christian.

Here, indeed, in this simplicity, is an important element, which has been till now lacking in the play's scheme, and in the various provocations to thought set before Hamlet upon his spiritual journey. But with its addition the gamut will be fairly complete; in its range from the players and their fiction to these ultimate facts, mirrored in the digging of a grave and in its harvest of Yorick's skull.

¹ Note the slight but sufficient indication of the passing of time '... the crowner hath sat on her' at least a day has passed. And Hamlet, by his letter in the last scene, was to reach the Court 'to-morrow.'

² For which see Furness and Dover Wilson.

H A M L E T

While the two bandy their shrewd humour :

Enter Hamlet and Horatio afarre off.

It is the Folio's stage direction, and an unusual one. It brings the two on eight lines before Q₂ does and leaves them there, '*afarre off*,' listening. I see dramatic intention in this. From the tenor of the letters to Horatio and the King do we not expect a Hamlet returning primed to prompt vengeance—for his own attempted murder also now? It is one more in the series of such surprises that he should quietly glide back into the action, and stand there so indifferent and detached. He is spiritually far off too. For it is Ophelia's grave that is digging, the clown's song is a counterpart to hers:

In youth, when I did love, did love,
Methought it was very sweet,
To contract, O! the time, for—ah — my behove
O! methought there was nothing meet

and the allusive pattern is completed by Hamlet's fastidious comment:

Has this fellow no feeling of his business, that he sings
at grave-making?

Had he no feeling either, who could turn his back obliviously upon the havoc he had made? It is he that is digging this grave.¹

Even as Gertrude was spared by a hair's-breadth the knowledge -- though at last she will learn -- that her lover and husband is her husband's murderer,

¹ Strange in reality that Horatio should not have spoken to Hamlet of Ophelia's madness, but dramatically this passes unnoticed. Of her death, however, Shakespeare takes care to leave him ignorant. He had gone off in haste to meet Hamlet before it occurred.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

so Hamlet is here brought to the very edge of discovering that this grave over which he so serenely chops logic is Ophelia's. Within a little, we feel, he must learn it.

Whose grave's this, sirrah? . . . What man dost thou dig it for?

For no man, sir.

What woman, then?

For none, neither.

Who is to be buried in't?

—to which, surely, the shattering answer must be given. But the clown is his match at a quibble:

One that was a woman, sir; but rest her soul, she's dead.

And Hamlet enjoys the joke, and goes on to sentimentalise over Yorick, twenty years and more in his grave, now ousted from it for this new-comer—whichever she may be!—and to spin fancies round Alexander's dust. But so men who have greatly suffered do turn away to wistful sentiment and idle fancy. Hamlet lingers here because, once back at Elsinore, his duty must be done. And, behind this forgetfulness of Ophelia, there is the wish to forget.¹

¹ But we shall not appreciate this irony—of Hamlet's ignorance that it is Ophelia's grave over which he weaves his fancies—unless the clowns are kept in their place. Even though they speak no more than is set down for them, they can still (and habitually do) set on the more barren spectators to laugh—not at the natural shrewd humour with which Shakespeare has endowed them, but at the mere clowning they impose on it. The coarseness of this and the guffaws which greet it will fatally break the finer threads of implication and allusion by which the continuity of cause and effect—in this subsidiary story of Hamlet, Ophelia and Laertes—is

HAMLET

A strange little procession now advances; the King and Queen, two or three courtiers, a meagre coffin with its bearers, Laertes, a solitary priest.¹ We can interpret its strangeness well enough, and we watch Hamlet as, little by little, the truth dawns on him:

But soft! but soft! aside: here comes the King,
The Queen, the courtiers: who is that they follow?
And with such maimed rites? This doth betoken
The corse they follow did with desperate hand
Fordo its own life; 'twas of some estate. . . .

Now, indeed, he cannot but soon guess, as he listens to the recalcitrant priest answering Laertes, who it is that lies here:

Her obsequies have been as far enlarg'd
As we have warrantise; her death was doubtful,
And, but that great command o'ersways the order,
She should in ground unsanctified have lodg'd

sustained. Much depends upon continuity of action, too; upon the connection—and Shakespeare has woven it all very closely—between his 'mad' departure and her madness, the news of his return, the plot against him, her death, the digging of her grave, his arrival; if these things are not kept physically connected, their metaphysical connection will certainly be missed. Here, in a moment, Hamlet is to apostrophise Laertes as 'a very noble youth.' The irony of that too will be lost, unless Laertes' last appearance, when he was plotting to poison his adversary, is fresh in our memory, its vividness unspoiled by some 'act-interval' of distracting talk.

¹ The Folio has 'lords attendant,' and there is need of them to pluck Hamlet and Laertes asunder, though at a pinch the bearers of the coffin could do this. But otherwise the rites should be as 'maimed' as possible; the text explicitly dictates this; and how the editors, even down to Craig, Dowden and Adams, have allowed a full procession of priests and mourners to intrude it is hard to understand. For a salutary correction read what Dover Wilson has to say on the subject.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

Till the last trumpet; for charitable prayers,
Shards, flints and pebbles should be thrown on her;
Yet here she is allowed her virgin chants,
Her maiden strewments . . .

Yet he listens on and makes no sign. For this is the Hamlet who cried 'Let me be cruel'—shards, flints and pebbles themselves no harder than his heart to Ophelia!—and he dreads and resists the breaking of the callous crust that still armours him. Nor does it break until Laertes—the Church's benison as cruelly denied—claims Nature's kindlier one:

Lay her i' the earth;
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring! I tell thee, churlish priest,
A ministering angel shall my sister be,
When thou liest howling

This touches his heart, as the soft cry tells us:

What! the fair Ophelia?

but he listens still. Two more blows fall on him; one from the lost past, the Queen's

Sweets to the sweet: farewell!
I hop'd thou should'st have been my Hamlet's wife . . .

the other from Laertes:

O! treble woe
Fall ten times treble on that cursed head
Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense
Depriv'd thee of. . .

Then the stillness (Hamlet and Horatio motionless in their hiding-place, the rest held so by the presence of the stiller dead) is suddenly broken by the extravagant emotion of Laertes' leap into the

HAMLET

grave and his cry to them to pile the earth upon him too:

Till of this flat a mountain you have made,
To o'er-top old Pelion or the skyish head
Of blue Olympus.

and that brings Hamlet forth. For a moment they will hardly know him in his rough 'sea-gown' and travelling gear. There is something new to them besides in the measured, potent scorn of

What is he whose grief
Bear such an emphasis? whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wandering stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? . . .

and something minatory—to Claudius, at least—in the prerogatively royal ending

This is I,
Hamlet the Dane.

It is his first assertion in that kind. Laertes, in a flash, is out of the grave and at his throat.¹

¹ Neither Q₂ nor F₁ direct Hamlet to leap into the grave beside Laertes. But Q₁ (the text itself being very corrupt at this point) does: *Hamlet leaps in after Laertes*. And Rowe, not copying Q₁, which he probably never saw (though, as it happens, his earlier *Laertes leaps into the grave* is Q₁ word for word and does not follow F₁'s *leaps in the grave*), says simply: *Hamlet leaps into the grave*. And editors have—unanimously, as far as I know—followed Rowe. We seem, then, to have here a stage practice, dating from Shakespeare's time, and alive at the Restoration. But even this does not prove, I think, that it represents Shakespeare's intention. It is just the sort of thing that an actor of Hamlet, carried away by his own emotion, his mind anticipating the verbal onslaught, might do; it would prove startlingly effective (why stop to consider the incongruity of two men struggling together upon the top of a coffin?) and editorial sanction would perpetuate it.

Against that what can be cited? The absence of any such

A THIRD MOVEMENT

It is a Hamlet now royally master of himself indeed—the Hamlet once resolute to face his father's ghost and his own fate, the Hamlet Fortinbras will mourn and praise—who can sustain the onslaught with the mettled steadiness of

Thou pray'st not well.
I prithee take thy fingers from my throat;
For, though I am not splenitive and rash,
Yet have I something in me dangerous,
Which let thy wisdom fear. Hold off thy hand.

But, the next instant, the spiritual schism in him gapes again:

Why, I will fight with him upon this theme
Until my eyelids will no longer wag. . . .

stage direction from the two authoritative texts? There are many similar omissions, when the directions are nevertheless plainly implied. The implications of the text itself, therefore, are more important, if Shakespeare's intentions can be discerned in them. And the text here, I think, furnishes two sound arguments against it having been Shakespeare's intention, when he wrote the lines, that Hamlet should leap into the grave.

He can only do so at one point, upon the

This is I,
Hamlet the Dane.

and the royal dignity of the phrase must be quite ridiculously compromised by such an action. Secondly, it is plain that Laertes is meant to be the aggressor. But if Hamlet leaps into the grave, it can only look as if it was he that attacked Laertes. Therefore Laertes must leap out of the grave to attack him.

I fancy, then, that we may have here a little history of Shakespeare's betrayal by his actors. We need not suppose that he took it very seriously. But the lapse was never justified in the play's official records, Q2 and F1. It is merely thanks to actors and editors that the scene is played to this day in a muddle of excitement which confuses its dramatic intentions, when these are fairly plainly to be read in the text itself.

H A M L E T

I lov'd Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum. . . .

—he loved Ophelia, and he has killed her. In that terrible paradox is the essence of their tragedy, to which this dullard, glutted with his own grief, is blind. He knows—who better?—the worth of such grieving; and he mocks at it, yet less in Laertes than in his one-time self:

What wilt thou do for her? . . .
Dost thou come here to whine,
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I:
And, if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
Make Ossa like a wart! Nay, an thou'lt mouth,
I'll rant as well as thou.

Laertes, kept from strangling him, incapable of other answer, stands silent. Gertrude—the savage irony lost on her—makes the only excuse she can for him:

This is mere madness . . .

Then Hamlet, as if in pity for such blindness:

Hear you, sir;
What is the reason that you use me thus?
I lov'd you ever. . . .

—but at that he breaks off. For how make plain to them—when even to himself he cannot—the truth of this tragic discord between will and deed? So he flings them instead, for their satisfaction, a jingling reassurance of his 'madness':

but it is no matter;
Let Hercules himself do what he may,
The cat will mew and dog will have his day.

and departs.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

The King, watchfully silent so far, now takes command. There is the old kindly care for the afflicted in his

I pray you, good Horatio, wait upon him.

The balked Laertes he both soothes and spurs:

Strengthen your patience in our last night's speech;
We'll put the matter to the present push . . .

— the Queen coming within hearing, he frees himself of her with another kindly

Good Gertrude, set some watch over your son.

—and departs also; his arm, I think again linking Laertes', for, clearly, he must keep an eye on him:

This grave shall have a living monument
An hour of quiet shortly shall we see,
Till then, in patience our proceeding be.

And to end the scene the curtains of the inner stage would close.¹

The story of the embassy to England; the challenge to the fencing match; the end.

Hamlet appears again, speaking eagerly to Horatio.²

So much for this, sir — now shall you see the other. . . .

¹ That the grave-trap may be closed and the royal 'state' etc., prepared for the fencing match. The intervening scene would allow none too much time for this and in this need, it may well be, originated the elaboration of Osric and the entrance of 'A lord.'

² What he has been talking about is not clear; but the impression we gain is of eager business-like conversation, one subject dismissed for another to be broached. And this is all that matters.

H A M L E T

The exanimate mood of the talk to the gravedigger was dispelled by the encounter with Laertes, emotion, it may seem, finally burnt out of him in that blaze of remorse for Ophelia's death; and he is purged of his madness. But not of the effects of it. We feel, in the forced march of his speech and the checks and divagations of his thought, a still refractory mind, a dangerous temper. They show too in a trifle, his tone to the faithful Horatio, in the oddly reiterated 'Sir . . . sir . . . sir,' and the impatient requests to that best of listeners to listen. For the first time, moreover, comes a hint that the strain is telling on him physically:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep; methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. . . .

And what contempt for his own subtle brain and once devious ways in:

Rashly,—
And prais'd be rashness for it—let us know,
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,
When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

From this he passes to the tale of his stealing and unsealing the 'grand commission,' by which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were to conduct him to his death in England, and forging and sealing another, which is even now conducting them to theirs. He elaborates it beyond need in his grim enjoyment of the business, re-savours every detail, the 'bugs and goblins' of the King's attainder of him, his skill in the forgery, his parody of his uncle's diplomacy in the

A THIRD MOVEMENT

earnest conjuration from the King,
As England was his faithful tributary;
As love between them like the palm should flourish,
As peace should still her wheaten garland wear,
And stand a comma 'tween their amities,
And many such-like 'As'es of great charge. . . .

But Shakespeare makes yet more use of the sixty lines. The gap in the history of his absence is filled, and the Hamlet before us linked to the man of the parting promise :

O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.

His task's fulfilment is, in fact, at hand; for we surely need fear no more half measures, nor hysterical self-betrayal, from this expert cracksman, who could sit quietly in his cabin, his one-time friends asleep near him, and forge their death-warrant in a fine clerkly hand—and enjoy the work too! Nor have we before heard anything from him quite so cold-blooded as his response to Horatio's

So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't.
the

Why, man, they do ' make love to this employment;
They are not near my conscience; their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow.
'Tis dangerous when the base nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.

since, base though they may be, the King's stolen letter—which Horatio has here in his hand and turns to again, exclaiming

Why, what a king is this!
—was sealed, and the two would not have known

HAMLET

its contents.¹ And his tone towards the King has changed. Claudius has now not only

kill'd my king and whored my mother . . .

but

Popped in between the election and my hopes . . .

It is a sequent thought to that imperious 'Hamlet the Dane,' a new weight to his cause. And when Horatio warns him that 'it must be shortly known' what passes in England, the stern

It will be short. the interim is mine;

And a man's life's no more than to say 'One.'

promises imminent and open attack. But *we* know, and have just been quietly reminded, that attack upon him, by a deadlier trick than the trick of the play-scene, is imminent also. Which of the two enemies will strike home first?

For a sudden turn of thought shows him, after all, fatally guileless:

But I am very sorry, good Horatio,

That to Laertes I forgot myself;

For, by the image of my cause, I see

The portraiture of his. I'll court his favours . . .

The old sweetness and charm are in that, a little saddened; simplicity besides (he really believes that forgiveness for an injury should be given for the asking); and in his excuse:

But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me

Into a towering passion. . . .

¹ 'There's letters seal'd,' says Hamlet, and suspects at once that the two are to 'marshall' him 'to knavery' of some sort. But the King has not confided in them; his last words to them are

Away, for everything is sealed and done . . .

The implication is plain, I think, that they do not know.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

the quizzical self-detachment of the imaginative mind. He and the hot-headed Laertes are not made to understand each other. At which point Osric appears. And if the King fears that Hamlet might suspect something sinister in the fencing-match, what better voucher for its mere diversion than this fantastic waterfly?

The verbal fencing-match that follows does yet more to dissipate our remembrance of Ophelia in her grave, and to separate the sport from the mourning. Its topical flavour is to-day at a discount, but the dramatic effect is valid. We know, as we listen, that behind this ridiculous gabble about the wager, about the

six French rapiers and poniards, with their assigns,
as girdle, hangers, and so . . .

the 'carriages' that

are very dear to fancy, very responsive to the
hilt, most delicate carriages, and of very liberal conceit . . .

behind the trippingly sportsmanlike

The King, sir, hath laid, that in a dozen passes between yourself and him, he shall not exceed you three hits; he hath laid on twelve for nine, and it would come to immediate trial, if your lordship would vouchsafe the answer.

there lurks death.

Hamlet yields, as usual, to the distraction of a little intellectual cat-and-mouse play. And Osric is easy game; as easy as he himself is more practically proving to Claudius. We may note that even at this sort of thing he has grown crueller. The mockery is overt and brutal, with no 'madness' for mitigation. We shall note too that,

H A M L E T

having amused himself with the creature, Hamlet,
upon that sudden

How if I answer no?

comes near to spoiling the whole plan. And he
only falls in with it in impatient indifference:

Sir, I will walk here in the hall; if it please his
majesty, 'tis the breathing time of day with me; let the
foils be brought, the gentleman willing, and the King
hold his purpose, I will win for him if I can; if not, I
will gain nothing but my shame and the odd hits.

—with which answer Osric departs; to deliver it
to the King, however, with so much 'flourish,'
that a soberer, anonymous Lord has next to be
sent to discover what, beyond the fact that he
will walk here in the hall, Hamlet did mean.

The Folio omits this Lord. The need for still
more matter here while the throne and the
furniture for the fencing match were made ready
on the inner stage—the origin, possibly, of his
existence—may have gone when its text was
settled. But Shakespeare, in Q2, had as usual
turned the thing forced on him to good dramatic
account. Through the mere repetition—

his majesty . . . sends to know if your pleasure
hold to play with Laertes, or that you will take longer
time.

—the King's anxiety peeps out. And the imper-
sonal phrases help resolve the scene (to pass from
Osric's flummery direct would have been too abrupt
a change) into its next and graver key. For there
falls about Hamlet now the shadow of death. He is
aware of it without knowing it. Through his answer:

I am constant to my purposes. They follow the
King's pleasure. If his fitness speaks, mine is ready,
now or whensoever, provided I be so able as now.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

sounds a constancy, a fitness, a readiness to meet a weightier challenge than this. And his quiet

In happy time.

accepts more than the mere fact that

The King, and Queen, and all are coming down.

It is as if the vanished 'madness' had left something like clairvoyance behind.

Horatio warns his friend:

You will lose this wager, my lord.

—the faithful eye detecting intolerable strain, which Hamlet (after a cool 'I do not think so') owns to, with a childlike

But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart. . . .

then dismisses:

It is but foolery; but it is such a kind of gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman.

Shakespeare likes to bring his rarer moments home to us by such familiar touches.

But Horatio is just so troubled for him:

If your mind dislike anything, obey it; I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.

and the intimate simplicity of it all sets off the simple nobility of the valediction:

Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

HAMLET

It is to no more than this, at the last, that the subtly questing mind has come.¹

As the curtains of the inner stage part, the disquieted Horatio is silenced by a gesture; and there once more—it is much the same picture as at the play's beginning—is the sinister brilliance of Claudius and his Court, Hamlet's sombre figure outlined against it as before.²

¹ I venture to prefer the Folio reading of the last sentence, which I understand (though that may not be the best of reasons), to Q2's, which despite Dover Wilson's admirable explanation, I do not. But we need not gather from the Folio that Hamlet is merely thinking— with St. Paul and the Burial Service— of the worldly goods a man must leave behind. Surely it is his loss of other things that he has in mind, of things he loved and valued; his father's care, his faith in his mother, the ideal love for Ophelia, hers for him. He could keep nothing of all this. And so, with things such as this, it still would be. What is it, then, to leave betimes, before he has lost more? But let us own that, whatever the meaning may be, it is more than vaguely conveyed.

The final 'Let be' has disappeared from the Folio, and in strictness perhaps should not be stolen from Q2 for an addition to its text. But if the Q2 text is corrupt (as, being to me incomprehensible, I cannot but think it) and the Folio's a correction of it, the two small words might well, I suppose, have dropped out in the process. Admit them—as Editors commonly do—as an isolated phrase, and their technical dramatic utility is clear. Hamlet's satiric speech definitely alarms Horatio, who makes a move as if to stop the match after all—in which he is checked by that curt, commanding 'Let be'. This ends the passage between the two with a sharp touch of suggested action, links it by an arresting moment to the 'discovery' of King, Queen and Court, and will hold our attention while that larger spectacle makes good its own hold on us. Therefore, if it is allowable, it will be a strengthening (not here in the dramatic fabric).

² The parting of the curtains and the actual discovery behind them of King, Queen and Court is indicated with some probability, I think, by the nature of the stage direction in Q2:

A THIRD MOVEMENT

The scene of catastrophe which follows is full of complicated matter, close packed.¹ Shakespeare will have inherited its holocaust—which may suit him well enough, but he has to harmonise it with his own enrichment of the play's theme. The sudden huddle of violent events is in itself effective after the long delays of plot and counter-plot, but

A table prepared, Trumpets, Drums and officers with Cushions, King, Queene, and all the state, Foiles, daggers, and Laertes.

(it is stage direction and property list combined, and entirely businesslike) nor is it even contradicted by the conventional

Enter King, Queene, Laertes . . .

of the Folio, for 'enter' often implies discovery. The drawing of the curtains while Hamlet and Horatio stand there is certain. The King, Queen and Court *could* then enter in procession. But this would involve a slight delay; and, after the extended preliminaries, Shakespeare would be concerned, I fancy, to close up the action and move steadily towards his climax. In this the discovery is an appreciable help. A likely addition to the stage-management would be the simultaneous entry through the doors on the outer stage of extra courtiers or guards, and the table for the foils may have had to be moved down. Hamlet, so I believe, is no longer in mourning (cf. p. 251 *et seq.*). But he would be in his travelling clothes; and these against the Court splendour, would look sombre. Laertes, and even the King and Queen, it may be said, would be in son's sort of mourning for Ophelia, having but just returned from the funeral. I do not think so (though Laertes need not be gaily dressed, and, at the graveside, the King and Queen might have worn some mourning outer garments). Realistic likelihood will always give way to legitimate dramatic effect.

¹ It runs to some 170 lines. Compare it and its complexities—if we are studying Shakespeare's technical progress as a playwright—with the long-drawn-out last scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, which is but 30 lines less than twice the length.

HAMLET

character must be eloquent in them still. And this network of action is lucid with character.

We are at the crisis of what we have called the counter-action, the King's war against Hamlet. The first attack—the dispatching him to be murdered in England—has failed. We saw nothing of it, and its mere recounting will not have prejudiced the effect of this, which, doubly provided for, by poisoned sword and cup, can (we are to feel) scarcely fail. On Hamlet's part there is no more plotting, only cold resolution to do what he has to do; but that, seemingly, is in abeyance for the while. Such is our approach to the scene.

The apology to Laertes is candid:

Give me your pardon, sir: I've done you wrong;
But pardon 't, as you are a gentleman.
This presence knows, and you must needs have heard,
How I am punish'd with a sore distraction . . .

and the explanation, even in its riddling logic—

What I have done,
That might your nature, honour and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet:
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

—is meant to be so. Did his aping of madness send him verily mad? In the player who

But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit . . .

he had discerned that strange confusion between the imagined and the real (which Shakespeare

A THIRD MOVEMENT

himself had cause enough to know). He can look back calmly to the delirium of it now. But who else will understand? So he ends with a simpler plea:

Sir, in this audience,
Let my disclaiming from a purpos'd evil
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house,
And hurt my brother.

—and in the sad cadence of that 'brother' is the last echo of Ophelia's story.

Laertes is a still unpractised scoundrel; and it will not be too easy for him, with the phial of poison for his sword ready in his pocket, to respond to the appeal to his 'most generous thoughts.' But, with a little quibbling about honour, he manages it. A jury of gentlemen shall judge his cause against Hamlet later—when he has murdered him! He can even brave his conscience with an outspoken

But till that time,
I do receive your offer'd love like love,
And will not wrong it

The two of them thus reconciled, the customary pleasant stir of preparation for such a match begins; the foils are brought, compliments pass and deprecating protests, and Osric adds his expedient touch of frivolity to the affair.

Hamlet is satisfied with the first foil he takes. Laertes demands another, and selects it from among the spare ones on the table. The King is speaking now, with every one attentive:

Set me the stoups of wine upon that table.
If Hamlet give the first or second hit,
Or quit in answer of the third exchange,
Let all the battlements their ordnance fire . . .

H A M L E T

and so the 'sword unbated' can be secured unnoticed. This screen of oratory, in fact—

The King shall drink to Hamlet's better breath;
And in the cup an union shall he throw,
Richer than that which four successive kings
In Denmark's crown have worn. Give me the cups;
And let the kettle to the trumpet speak,
The trumpet to the cannoner without,
The cannons to the heavens, the heaven to earth,
'Now the king drinks to Hamlet!' . . .

—permits the 'noble youth' privily to 'anoint' the sword besides.¹

¹ These preliminaries to the fight have to be deduced from the text; they should conform to dramatic effect and likelihood combined, but not to one of these at the expense of the other. The King orders Osric to present the foils. If they were modern fencing foils he could carry half a dozen on his arm; of the long Elizabethan sword not more than three or four. But he may well leave two or three upon the table, and it will not do for him to carry them all, or Hamlet (we may think) might select the one that is unbated. This, then, will have been among those left on the table, and Laertes—pretending that his first choice is 'too heavy'—can, under cover of the King's speech, secure it later. But does not its merely being left there make Osric an accomplice? If we had time to reason the matter out, there would be grounds for suspicion. But if the foils are discovered on the table when the curtains part, and Osric simply takes the first three or four to his hand, we shall hardly ask ourselves that question. Moreover, when Laertes says 'Let me see another' and moves (as I think) towards the table, Osric is answering Hamlet's question:

These foils have all a length?

and will have his back turned to it. Then, as the King says

Set me the stoups of wine upon that table.

—i.e. upon a table on the opposite side of the stage—we shall see Laertes take the unbated sword, and we shall know by his expression that he has it. It will be even more effective to see him take the phial from his pouch and dip the tip of

A THIRD MOVEMENT

The match begun, its conduct becomes for a while the main action of the scene, the dialogue diminishing to an accompaniment. The first

the sword in it; and the King's jovial oratory is, I feel sure, intended—both by Shakespeare and the King—to provide occasion for this; all eyes but ours turned upon Claudius. Even Horatio, that faithful watcher of the play-scene, does not observe Laertes.

Dr. Dover Wilson thinks that Osric is necessarily an accomplice; the chief proof of it that it is to him Laertes says later that he is justly killed with his own treachery. I can only answer that Shakespeare 'does not do these things'—does not introduce a ridiculous fribble, and by one *ex post facto* hint in the text convert him to a scoundrel; and, moreover, leave it at that. Nor do I see how the actor of Osric could, merely by facial expression, convey his guilt. Laertes begins his confession—

Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe . . .

—to Osric, because it is he who has gone to his aid, asking him how he does. He continues it to Hamlet a moment after with

Hamlet, thou art slain; . . .

The treacherous instrument is in thy hand,

Unbated and envenom'd . . .

—all the weight of his remorse in that. And in the interval Hamlet's attention and ours has been turned to the dying Queen; too strong a competition by far for an Osric's guilty grimacings. No, I fancy the poor water-fly can be returned 'Not guilty', and allowed to announce 'young Fortinbras's' arrival from Poland with a clear countenance and conscience.

Both student and producer, however, should take care to master Dover Wilson's explanations of the wager and the fight (in the new Cambridge Shakespeare and in his preface to the Shakespeare Association facsimile of George Silver's *Paradoxes of Defence*).

The wager, indeed, is a minor matter. If we do not grasp its meaning we can still be amused by the jargon; and I expect that not a few among Shakespeare's audience were in that case. But the proper conduct of the fight is important. I owe much to these elucidations of it.

H A M L E T

bout, indeed, would pass in a tense silence but for the inspiring

*Trumpets the while.*¹

—a silence only broken when Hamlet scores and claims:

One.

Laertes (touched too in the self-esteem that Claudius took such pains to foster) protests:

No!

Hamlet curtly appeals:

Judgment?

and has it from Osric—who is in his element:

A hit, a very palpable hit.

Laertes, a peg down, takes fresh breath with

Well, again!

But the King, for an instant, interposes.

We see now why he thought it well to back the poisoned rapier with the poisoned cup. Hamlet is the better fencer; Laertes may not touch him at all. He is running no risks:

Stay, give me drink. Hamlet, this pearl is thine.
Here's to thy health. Give him the cup.

A most gracious ceremonial! He drinks from the cup first, then draws the pearl from his finger and

¹ Q2. The omission of the direction in the Folio may well be accidental, for a little lower down the Q's

Drum, trumpets and shot. Florish, a peece goes off.
is abbreviated to

Trumpets sound, and shot goes off.

though not only does its text still demand the 'Kettle,' but, by stage directions elsewhere, drums are in use.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

drops it in; and we shall guess, if we cannot see, that he has pressed the spring which releases the poison.¹ Then, as the cup is carried to Hamlet:

Drum, trumpets and shot. Flourish, a peeece goes off.

In truth a splendid pledge! But Hamlet, when the din is over, says quietly and coldly—for he will not drink amity to his uncle:

I'll play this bout first; set it by awhile.

The second bout proves strenuous, for the bad blood in Laertes is fermenting. Hamlet wins it, and claims it with a gay

Another hit; what say you?

And Laertes does not wait for the humiliating judgment this time, but confesses wryly:

A touch, a touch, I do confess.

Then, while the two recover breath, the King's soft voice is heard:

Our son shall win.

It is spoken smilingly to the Queen. There is a taunt in it for Laertes, let him show his prowess, and quickly, or their enemy may escape them. Its fatherly affection might well anger Hamlet; but, exhilarated with the sport, he does not heed. For the first time (the irony of it!) we see him oblivious to all trouble, as sane in body as in mind, and in

¹ Forewarned as they have been, Shakespeare's audience would be fully alive to what the ring and the gesture must imply. Claudius is an expert poisoner; and such subtle methods as this, and the pouring of the poison in his brother's ear, were a recognised part of the equipment of the 'Italianate' villain.

H A M L E T

the flush of success; the Hamlet of Ophelia's dreams, of the

unmatched form and feature of blown youth.

—a Hamlet that might have been. And his mother is so happy to see the change in him—his madness cured, and with this the bitterness which had parted them ended—that she can even banter him a little:

He's fat and scant of breath.

Here, Hamlet, take my napkin, rub thy brows. . . .

She leaves her 'state' and trips to where he stands. The page with the King's cup is still waiting near him. In a merry caprice she seizes it, and, mischievously parodying the favourite royal phrase and trumpet-saluted gesture:

The Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet.

What, upon the instant, is Claudius to do? While Hamlet bows his thanks, he calls out

Gertrude, do not drink.

But why should she not? Prettily wilful, making him, I think, a mock reverence:

I will, my lord, I pray you, pardon me.

she disobeys him and does drink. She has given him, we note, while she speaks and curtseys, a moment's chance to save her—at the cost of his own safety. The moment passes; he has let it pass:

It is the poison'd cup! it is too late.

—retribution outwitting even his quick wit! But she finds, for the instant, nothing amiss; and her next gesture is to press, in all innocence and affec-

A THIRD MOVEMENT

tion, the poisoned cup on her son. If he would not pledge his uncle and make all well between them, surely he will not refuse her. Though he does not positively refuse, his response is cold:

I dare not drink yet, Madam; by and by.

But she feels so near to winning him again that she bids him, tenderly, as if he were still a child:

Come, let me wipe thy face.

and, as a child might, he lets her.

While this is passing the thwarted, desperate Laertes is whispering to the King:

My lord, I'll hit him now.

to get no answer but a grim

I do not think't

--for Claudius, his guilty eyes on the doomed Queen, feels himself slipping to confusion and defeat. Is it the sight of mother and son seemingly reunited that prompts Laertes'

And yet 'tis almost 'gainst my conscience.

Hamlet turns, buoyantly ready for the third bout.

This also passes in silence, and is ended by Osric's

Nothing, neither way.

But is it ended? Hamlet is he 'f off his guard when Laertes gives himself benefit of the doubt, and with a

Have at you now.

thrusts and scores his first hit. It is all he will need to score, for he has drawn blood!

Stung by the trickery of the attack, the wound, the treachery of the sharpened sword, Hamlet closes

H A M L E T

with his man and wrests this from him, forcing on him his own in exchange.¹ The King's

Part them! they are incens'd.

passes unheeded; for eyes are now turned on Gertrude, who, the poison at work in her, stands swaying to and fro. Upon Osric's

Look to the queen there, ho!

attendants go to her aid. The fight suddenly and finally stops; Horatio's steady voice, heard for the first time, interprets to us what has happened:

They bleed on both sides. . . .

So Hamlet has his death wound. We know it, and he does not. Laertes has his, and knows it; and the pluck goes out of him.

¹ For what seems to me the simplest and, more importantly, the most dramatic way of effecting the exchange, see Dover Wilson's note in the new Cambridge *Hamlet*. But he does not make it indubitably clear that Hamlet is 'enraged,' not merely by the smart of the wound, but by the treachery involved. (He guesses half the truth; the rest is to come.) This is needed, however, to account for the fury of his attack on Laertes, an attack so furious that it stretches him on the ground; and it is illustrated by the King's

Part them! they are incens'd.

The 'traditional' stage business—if I remember it rightly—which involved a fight with modern foils only, was that Hamlet should be wounded in the forearm, should note the blood flowing and surmise the unbuttoned foil (I am not sure that Laertes was not supposed to remove the button from his foil upon the 'My lord, I'll hit him now'). Then he had to beat Laertes' foil from his hand, put his foot on it, and offer him his own in exchange—which Laertes would shamefacedly take. The idea involved is the same.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

Hamlet does not answer his friend's

How is it, my lord?

for, free of the fighting, his eyes are on the Queen.
But Osric's

How is it, Laertes?

brings the beginning of confession:

Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric,
I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery

It is checked for a moment by Hamlet's peremptory

How does the Queen?

which Claudius answers with a desperate

She swoonds to see them bleed.

—for his instinct is to save himself; and Laertes^o
(whose own mouth will soon be shut) has accounted
for Hamlet, after all, and the poison might be
explained away. But retribution outpaces him
again. Gertrude speaks:

No, no, the drink, the drink —O my dear Hamlet!
The drink, the drink; I am poison'd.

—and in the 'O my dear Hamlet' what agony
of remorse! For at last she understands. 'As
kill a king. . . . a second time I kill my husband
dead. . . . he poisons him in the garden for his
estate . . . !' And she has seen *this* cup sent on
its errand.

At the sound of the one fatal, memorable word
Hamlet is transformed The last shreds of self-

H A M L E T

conscious weakness fall from him; and he stands there, Hamlet the Dane indeed.

O villainy! How? Let the door be lock'd:
Treachery! seek it out.¹

His command is obeyed without question. Claudius is trapped.

The answer to that 'How?' is to come from Laertes. But he must confess his own guilt to Hamlet first. So the King's doom is suspended for a torturing minute or so; and we are aware of him, the glib diplomatist, jovial drinker and dancer, the 'very very peacock,' skulking among his bewildered Court. Hamlet hears from Laertes his own doom; but he pays no heed to that; he waits for the end of the story. When he has it—

thy mother's poisoned—
I can no more!—the King—the King's to blame.

—he turns, and, no one staying him, takes vengeance.

At the sword thrust the courtiers raise a perfunctory cry of 'Treason.' But, though the wounded man cries pitifully

O, yet defend me friends, I am but hurt . . .

they do nothing. Then Hamlet drops the sword, and takes the cup and drags the creature out, and

¹ This is (spelling excepted) the Folio's reading. Q2's does not differ except in punctuation. Rowe follows the Folio. Theobald would seem to have been the first to turn the 'How?' into a 'Ho!', and modern editors, even Dover Wilson, have followed him. Why, I cannot imagine. The 'How?' is an obvious question, to which Laertes makes answer; and it knits the sense together and sustains the tension of the moment better than a redundant exclamation can.

A THIRD MOVEMENT

—as one would medicine a dog—chokes his mouth open and pours the poison down; and he consecrates to the consummate moment his last outburst of mockery:

Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane,
Drink of this potion. Is thy union here?
Follow my mother.

Into the silence which follows, steals Laertes dying

He is justly served;
It is a poison tempered by himself.
Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet;
Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,
Nor thine on me!

He dies, and Hamlet feels death coming upon him too.

His first thought is for his friend:

I am dead, Horatio . . .

only his next for his still-agonising mother, the source of all this ill. Speechless, she can yet have heard all; at the end nothing has been spared her. And from her son comes only a

Wretched Queen, adieu.

He feels men's eyes on him, the assassin of their King:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, death,
Is strict in his arrest—O! I could tell you—
But let it be . . .

And once more, and for the last time, he seeks help where he has ever found it:

Horatio, I am dead;
Thou liv'st; report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied

H A M L E T

One certain sign of the great writer is that his resourcefulness does not fail him as he nears the end of book or play. So here. All, we shall be feeling, is about over; and suddenly the imperturbable Horatio, the man

that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hath ta'en with equal thanks . . .

passionately resolves not to survive his friend:

Never believe it!
I'm more an antique Roman than a Dane:
Here's yet some liquor left.

Hamlet's dying strength cannot wrest the cup from him; but he knows a better means:

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story. . . .

New duty laid on him, this friend will be faithful still. And at once, for reminder of that world without and its claims, we hear

A march afarre off.

an army's drums and fifes, and a shot of salute. It is, says Osric,

Young Fortinbras, with conquest come from Poland . . .
ambassadors from England too.¹ Hamlet, self-

¹ Q2 and F. both mark an *Enter Osric* here, having given him no exit. But it looks as if the giving of the speech itself to him had been a matter of theatrical economy on Shakespeare's part—as if this particular actor had been the most competent person available to speak these three important lines; and that implies a shedding of the water-fly—unless

A THIRD MOVEMENT

forgetful, calm, orders affairs of state :

I do prophesy the election lights
On Fortinbras; he has my dying voice;
So tell him . . .

Then, upon

the rest is silence.

he slips peacefully out of life—to the rhythm of the drum-beats of the triumphant approach of the man whose 'divine ambition'* put him to such shame.¹ A last quiet stroke of tragic irony.

But the story which Horatio will tell

to the yet unknowing world. . .

is not that of his weakness and melancholy, his scruples and failings. These are dead with him. Even his blunders, the

accidental judgments, casual slaughters . . .

we are to suppose an Osric shocked quite out of his fantastic self by what has happened. But such niceties in a minor character would not come into question at such a moment. The lines belong to a 'messenger' and they are spoken by Osric (what, however, has become of the anonymous Lord, who reinforced the invitation to the duel? Surely, he could have served this turn). His 'exit' is of no importance and need not be editorially provided. If he passes for a second or so into the ante-room or is seen to encounter an attendant in the doorway—anything of that sort will be amply sufficient.

¹ He says here besides

I cannot live to hear the news from England . . .

into which might—by the so minded—be read regret that he will never know for certain whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been satisfactorily 'hoist with their own petar.' But this is certainly not the intention of the line. The ambassadors from England are introduced to him as to Denmark's rightful ruler at the moment, and, so answering, he says he will not live to receive them; that is all.

HAMLET

will find a less tenebrous place in the picture seen as a whole. For finally he has not failed. The wrong to be righted led him to no such gallant adventure as his father or this hero, whose prowess he so envied, would have confidently taken in hand. It was a cancerous wrong —

carnal, bloody and unnatural . . .

—eating into the sanctities of life and his faith in them. But at the cost of his life he has righted it at last; and Fortinbras comes to a heritage purged of evil.

O, proud death!
What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,
That thou so many princes at a shot
So bloodily hast struck!

—he may well exclaim it! And the whole stately ending reminds us that this most introspective of plays has also been a tragedy of great events, which have added their dignity to its own. The note was early struck; in talk of war, in the ominous

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark . . .

and it has echoed through the play. And we are sent from the theatre now with our minds not simply upon the pity of Hamlet's death, but stirred to some pride in him.

Fortinbras is the fortunate man, the enemy whom happy chance turns friend, the welcomed stranger with the easier work to do. The future is his. He the more owes (as he will know when he has heard Horatio's tale) a tribute to the life here

A THIRD MOVEMENT

sacrificed. He pays it as an honourable soldier should :

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage :
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royally, and for his passage,
The soldiers' music and the rites of war
Speak loudly for him. . . .

*Exeunt marching : after the which a peal of ordnance are
shot off*

It is not by mere convention that Shakespeare
allots him a hero's end

A NOTE ON THE FIRST QUARTO

THE PIRATE AND HIS METHODS

THE *Hamlet* which Shakespeare left us is in the Second Quarto and the Folio. From the First Quarto the positive harvest is a few interesting stage directions and a way of reducing the action to such a 'two hours traffic' (or less) as would be passable on the Elizabethan stage. And a performance of it—the merely verbal corruptions set straight—would be an instructive experiment. We should see what, to the mind of the pirate-compiler, were the qualities which made the play popular.¹

The theory most commonly accepted at the moment is, I believe, that Q1 does not represent an earlier version by Shakespeare, nor even an earlier alien play partly amended by him; but that it is a 'surreptitious' and 'assembled' text, a garbling and debasing of the mature *Hamlet* which we have. From a bibliographical standpoint I am incompetent to argue the matter. But it seemed worth while to consider Q1 simply as a piece of playwriting, and, comparing it with Q2, to ask how far, as such, it can or cannot be accommodated to the theory. In the main, no doubt, it can be; but not, I think, altogether.

We have, to begin with, such truncate and clumsy lines as are the likeliest possible result of an attempt to remember the speeches containing

¹ William Poel, among his many other useful services to Elizabethan drama, did, I think, do something like this.

A NOTE ON THE FIRST QUARTO

them made by someone who had listened to them fairly often (not too intelligently) but had never learnt them:

To be, or not to be, I there's the point,
To Die, to sleepe, is that all? I all:
No, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes . . .

—the crude sense of the real thing. As to the unrelated lines mixed in with the garbled text:

And borne before an everlasting Judge . . .
The happy smile, and the accursed damn'd . . .
Scorned by the right rich, the rich curssed of the
poore?
The widow being oppressed, the orphan wrong'd,
The taste of hunger, or a tirant's raigne
And thousand more calamities besides . . .

—they are the sort of thing which, recollection failing, anybody familiar with the Elizabethan theatre could improvise out of the scraps and ends of plays floating in his memory.

On the other hand, there is Voltimand's speech, which seemingly comes direct from the mouth of an actor who had spoken it in a performance of Q₂, or some very similar text (and, if it does, here is a sign that the minor actors in a company were expected to be fairly word-perfect), or from the 'part' itself from which he had learned it.

Then there are the twenty-eight lines, peculiar to Q₁, which Furnivall declares to be Shakespeare's own.¹ That they might well be is undeniable, and this is a point against a simple acceptance of the 'pirated Q₂' theory. But they might also have been provided by somebody familiar with Shakespeare's style. In one of them—

As would have moov'd the stoniest breast alive . . .

¹ See his introduction to the N.S.S. Grigg's facsimile.

H A M L E T

—there is a faint echo of *Twelfth Night's*

Lady, you are the cruellest she alive . . .
Love make his heart of flint that you shall love. . . .

—the more noticeable, perhaps, because Corambis' lines (which Furnivall does not cite):

 such men often prove
Great in their wordes, but little in their love.

must surely also derive from Viola's

 for still we prove
Much in our vows but little in our love.

On the other hand, again, a large proportion of the more memorable phrases—popular tags to this day, likeliest to be so then, and easy quarry for a pirate—come through correctly:

Frailtie, thy name is Woman.

He was a man, take him for all in all,
I shall not looke upon his like againe.

Angels and Ministers of grace defend us . . .

There are more things in heaven and earth *Horatio*,
Then are Dream't of, in your philosophie.

Rest, rest, perturbed spirit.

The time is out of joynt. O, cursed spite
That ever I was borne to set it right.

—and this is but a selection from the first two scenes.

Another very famous tag comes through with the actor trick of repetition attached to it:

O my prophetike soul, my uncle! my uncle!

A NOTE ON THE FIRST QUARTO

And Q2's elaborate variations upon

Get thee to a nunnery. . . .

become a mere gabbling, eight times reiterated

to a Nunnery goe.

This is just the sort of thing which an inferior actor, when the substance of a scene has failed to hold the audience (and the emotional structure and the sequences of this one are not easily made clear), is tempted to do; to finish it, that is to say, with a series of effective flourishes. And something of the same sort is to be seen in the triple repetition of Yorick's name, which anticipates—and prejudices—Q2's effective repetition of Alexander's, which is in its turn, when the warrantor of Q1 deals with it, spoilt by being overdone.

These things all point, in the main, to a piracy and a garbling of Q2. Besides which, Q1 gives us a play just as elaborate in plan as the genuine and matured *Hamlet*; as many characters, though they are less fully characterised, and an abundance of incidental material. Fortinbras and Denmark's foreign policy are there; so (his name changed) are Reynaldo and his spying expedition; so, despite compression is all that is material of the players and their play, with a reference, even, to 'private plays' and 'the humour of children'; so are all the circumstances of the journey to England; we have the Grave-diggers, we have even an anonymous Osric—not merely, then, the major but most of the minor features of the authentic *Hamlet*. The pirate crams all he can into the smaller space permitted him. And, if slapdash, he is competent after his kind; for the cardinal point of each scene will generally be left us.

HAMLET

Something else suggests the pirate: the fact that it is in the last third of the play that the text is most contracted and corrupt and the botching at its worst.¹ The last third of any play will be apt to suffer so at the hands of a man who fancies himself as—no poet, of course, or ‘serious’ dramatist, but a practical man of the theatre. For there is nothing he so fears as the impatience of his audience once the excitement of a play’s mid-crisis is past. After that push on quickly to the end, will be his rule. Now Shakespeare, writing generously throughout, is even more generous in the last third of the play, of incidental matter, and of what a ‘practical’ pirate might well consider ‘mere talk.’ Hamlet is absent from the action too; that the audience (and possibly the actor) may not like. And when he does return he has left emotional rhetoric—stuff, says the practical man, much to the taste of the audience—behind him. Ample reasons here, then, for the extra contraction we find.

THE CHANGED SCENE-SEQUENCE

But two things at least (apart from the question of Furnivall’s Shakespearean lines) do not fit the theory that Q₁ is nothing but a stolen and garbled version of the mature Q₂.

Why should a pirate re-name Polonius, Corambis

¹ Compare the pagination of the two Quartos. To the end of the Closet scene (the mid-crisis); Q₁, roughly, 45 pp.; Q₂, 64. But from here to the end; Q₂, 35 pp.; Q₁, 18 only; hardly more than half. It may be worth while remarking that the more legitimate omissions of the Folio are also mainly to be found in this last third of the play.

A NOTE ON THE FIRST QUARTO

and Reynaldo, Montano? I know of no convincing answer.

And why should he displace the 'To be or not to be . . .' soliloquy and Hamlet's scene with Ophelia? Having got the rest of the action right it would surely be hard to make this mistake. And why intentionally make such a change? But did he? Must there not have been some version of the play with this scene-sequence in it?

There is the trace of one in Q2. In Q1:

Lets to the King . . .

says Corambis to Ophelia; and he takes her to the King and Queen, and the rest follows naturally. In Q2:

goe we to the King . . .

says Polonius; and they set off. But Ophelia never arrives. The thing is not explained; but, of course, in the Q2 scene-sequence she is not wanted. Does this show Shakespeare merely changing his plan of action, or revising an earlier play, either his own or another man's, without troubling to alter the tell-tale phrase? If it shows a mere currently made change of plan, then the pirate took a hint from Shakespeare, but devised Q1's scene-sequence for himself— which is more than unlikely. If he found his scene-sequence somewhere, was it in an earlier play by Shakespeare, or another man's? One can give a guessing answer to both questions at once. It is as unlikely that he would take so much as he almost proveably has done in the shape of character and dialogue from Q2, and go back to a very different play, be it Shakespeare's or another's, simply for this scene-sequence

H A M L E T

and the change of names.¹ Does it not look, therefore, as if there had existed a version of the play, written by Shakespeare, substantially mature, but which yet contained the Q₁ scene-sequence, a Corambis and Montano, and, possibly, the Shakespearean lines (or better versions of them) which Furnivall cites?

There is much to be said, from a more narrowly dramatic point of view, for Q₁'s scene-sequence. The 'To be or not to be . . .' soliloquy comes well from a Hamlet last heard lamenting that the time was out of joint, last pictured to us (in Q₁) parting from Ophelia,

Silent, as in the midtime of the night. . . .

And from this picturing of the one encounter to their next, which we ourselves are to see, the thread of their story will be sustained without interruption, save for the few lines given to the introducing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the episode of the returned Ambassadors. And his puzzling talk to her about beauty transforming honesty to a bawd will then follow so much more closely than in Q₂ upon his angry grief for his mother's frailty, that the connection between the two should be as much more apparent.

In what, then, is the Q₂ scene-sequence an improvement?

It enables Shakespeare (as we have seen) to develop in the long discursive scene with Rosen-

¹ It is worth noting that Montano-Reynaldo only appears at this point, where the structural difference between Q₁ and Q₂ is rooted. Also I have ventured to diagnose a reconsideration of the character of Corambis-Polonius at this very juncture also. See p. 253.

A NOTE ON THE FIRST QUARTO

crantz and Guildenstern, Polonius and the Players, the imaginative, speculative, passive and unpractical side of Hamlet, and to develop it in an appropriately uneventful setting. And from this passivity it is Hamlet who rouses himself, to the self-reproach of

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I! . . .

and to devising the test of the play-scene. That he should do this of his own accord, self-stimulated, and not (as in Q1) after his nerves have been rewrought upon by the meeting with Ophelia, and he has discovered that the King and Polonius-Corambis have baited their trap with her and are spying on him, adds much moral weight to his character. It is dramatically better too that the hero should keep the initiative; should plot, not merely counter-plot.

The postponing of the scene with Ophelia, and of the shock to the King of the overheard

those that are married already, all but one, shall live . . .

until the very eve of the play-scene has advantages of its own besides. The King will not be left sitting still under such a threat, or leaving a leisurely elucidation of it to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In Q2 he at once projects Hamlet's despatch to England. This then becomes—as we have already noted¹--an important turning point in the play's counter-action, the King's against Hamlet. And, with the train of Hamlet's plot now about to be fired, action and counter-action can, after the discursive delays, be pressed forward together,

¹ See pp. 27; 75.

H A M L E T

and the story carried unchecked to its exciting mid-crisis and Hamlet's foiling and departure.

Yet there are signs which could be held to show that the pirate *had* two versions of the play to pick and choose between: one yielding him his Q₁ scene-sequence: the other, more lately written dialogue.

For instance; though Corambis does bring Ophelia to the King, she stands there completely ignored while he tells the tale of her love affair with Hamlet and of his own part in it. He tells it, in fact, just as it is more naturally told by Polonius in Q₂—of an Ophelia who is really absent.

Then there is the matter of Hamlet's talk with Corambis-Polonius. In Q₁ this follows close upon his discovery that Ophelia has been set in his path as a decoy, and that Corambis and the King have been spying on them. Does not that give much point to the sarcasm of

y'are a fishmonger.

(a bawd, a pandar), and of

I would you were so honest a man.

—so much that one is tempted to say: Shakespeare could only have written the lines in this connection.¹ On the other hand, if this beginning best suits Corambis, Hamlet's final and frankly expressive aside, Q₁'s

Olde doating foole.

is hardly harsh enough comment upon a so recently detected trap-baiter and spy. And it plainly, one would say, must derive from Q₂'s

These tedious old fools!

¹ There is, moreover, the stressed opposition of 'honesty' and 'bawd' in the scene with Ophelia.

A NOTE ON THE FIRST QUARTO

—which is suitable enough summing up of the still guiltless Polonius.

What explanation can be offered here? One is, of course, only piling guess upon guess. But is it not possible that the 'fishmonger' passage—with, it would be likely, the even more pointed

if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog. . . . Have you a daughter? . . . Let her not walk i' the sun. . . .

which Q₁, economising time, makes no use of—was originally written for the Q₁ sequence, to follow close upon the Ophelia-baited trap and Hamlet's discovery of it? But why, then, did Shakespeare not omit the lines when, addressed to a still guiltless Polonius, they had lost their primary point? They are effective lines in themselves; he would be loth to part with them. And he found, besides, I suggest, that the whole passage could as well be interpreted as sardonically oracular praise of the Polonius, who has so prudently withdrawn his daughter from the dangers of a corrupt world, in which men—Hamlet not least—are 'arrant knaves all,' and as fishmongerly-minded as he. Moreover, while Corambis, fresh from his spying and trap-setting, could hardly help seeing the point of the sarcasms, with Polonius they will pass, thus fined down, for madness; and with us, in so far as we miss the point of them, as being among those many twilight sayings, whose meaning is rather to be felt than comprehended—a quite legitimate dramatic effect where Hamlet and his 'madness' are concerned.¹

¹ These oracular passages, of course, abound; and the quality of their content ranges from the tragically bitter implication of the 'dear mother' farewell to the King,

H A M L E T

This implies, then, a correction of dialogue just sufficient to suit the change in the action, and our pirate left, for his chief resource, with a play pretty well as mature in plan and characterisation as Q₂, but still differing in the matter of this scene-sequence. But it looks also as if he must have had some knowledge of Q₂ itself and of the changes in its dialogue which followed upon the new scene-sequence, though he did not appreciate their significance.

Not that I have the temerity to offer this as a definite solution of the Q₁ problem. There are other difficulties, and other answers, doubtless, to these; and I have a dozen times repented the putting my foot into such a critical quagmire. But Q₁'s scene-sequence, and 'Corambis' and 'Montano,' are surely not the pirate's invention, and he plainly has a mature play to pilfer from, and Q₂'s scene-sequence is the more favourable to the exhibiting of Hamlet's character. One is tempted, therefore, to see that change as one of Shakespeare's (probably latest) contributions to the subduing and adapting of the story and the story-telling to this maturer end, and what is left cryptic in the scene between Hamlet and Polonius as an item, then, in the consequent process of subtilising the character under cover of its madness.¹

through the cold irony of this one, to the sheer nonsense of the 'camel . . . weasel . . . whale' bamboozling of Polonius. It is for the critic and the actor to master their latent significance, where this exists; the audience stands mid-way between Hamlet and his victim, between the puzzler and the puzzled.

¹ And it is thanks—or otherwise—to Dr. Dover Wilson that I found myself upon the track of this troublesome and, finally, not very important question. He is himself so puzzled by the apparent inapplicability of the 'fishmonger'

A NOTE ON THE FIRST QUARTO

What, finally, of Q1's explicit disclosure of the murder to the Queen and her explicit denial that she was privy to it? Is that the pirate's, or Kyd's; was it ever Shakespeare's? The question is not upon all fours with that of the scene-sequence; for practically only a single line spoken by Gertrude is involved, and this the pirate— who might well prefer his effects cut and dried—could easily have inserted on his own account. But once again, regard for character—this alone—must rule out the disclosure for Shakespeare. Because once the Queen knows of the murder, how is she, throughout the rest of the play, to be shown docile

— — —

passage that he deduces a now vanished stage direction in Q2, by which Hamlet enters unseen and overhears the plot to 'loose' Ophelia to him. It is such a simple solution that one is strongly tempted to accept it. I was tempted, and to the point of yielding. But my instincts rebelled. I did not like the spoiling of that entrance 'reading upon a book,' nor the commonplace symmetry of letting Hamlet stand there overhearing a plot by which the plotters were to stand there a little later overhearing him. Besides which—and far more important!—Dover Wilson's argument leads him fatally to having Hamlet regard Ophelia as a decoy the minute he (later on) sets eyes on her, and to knowing from the beginning of their scene together that the King and Polonius are listening. None of this can I admit for a moment. For the result will be to rob Hamlet's part in the scene of all the ebb and flow of tenderness and regret, inexplicable suffering and passion, to reduce it to a dead level of resentment, to make him, indeed, something of a self-righteous scold.

But mere objections are not enough. I felt I must propose, if I could, some alternative solution to the difficulty. For difficulty there is, even though it be—as are many dramatic difficulties—more real than apparent, and, therefore, in effect, the less important. This, then, is what I have found; though it surpasses the needs of an answer; and I had, of course, been puzzling over the question of the scene-sequence on its own account.

HAMLET

at the King's side, protecting him from Laertes, carelessly gay during the fencing match, and with no more made of the matter? And that she knew and feigned ignorance is not to be supposed; for this would make her a monster.¹

¹ For a discussion of the effect that Shakespeare does make—once again, a very subtle one—by bringing Gertrude to the very brink of disclosure but no farther, see p. 118, note.

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

VOCABULARY AND IMAGERY

THE Elizabethan dramatist was in thrall to no critical rule. He might do what he would as long as he made what he did effective. He might write as he chose: in prose or verse, and it might be any sort of verse; and he could chop and change from scene to scene, or in the course of a scene, between verse and prose, or one sort of verse and another, just as he would. Shakespeare, in this as in other things, claims every freedom. He develops no cut-and-dried method of his own. He tests and discards. His tendency, from the first, is to be rid of artifice and formula, of all forms which do not prove malleable; they break, indeed, under the stress to which he subjects them, of their moulding into seemingly spontaneous expression. For that is what he works towards; but to achieve it without sacrificing the force and distinction of essentially poetic speech. Syntax must be as malleable, since it has to shape not thought only, but the unruliest emotions. And his vocabulary and imagery, however fine, must be but an enhancement of familiar parlance if the effect of it is to come directly home to his audience.

Every language accumulates certain devices for emphasis and display, and the dramatist who bases his dialogue on familiar parlance is bound to employ them. The trouble is that a too casual currency will often have effaced their value, and

HAMLET

mere exaggeration will not restore it. A cumulation of two or three epithets, for instance, is a common means¹ of emphasis. Shakespeare, fresh to the theatre, finds their accumulation into a very catalogue to be a much-practised dramatic trick, which he practises himself for a time. Amid the many technical confusions of *Romeo and Juliet* comes that

Accurst, unhappy, wretched, hateful day! . . .
Beguil'd, divorced, wronged, spited, slain! . . .
Despis'd, distressed, hated, martyr'd, killed! . . .

Yet already he may be sensible that he is skirting the edge of the ridiculous, for he thrusts the Nurse's burlesque of the lamentations into the very midst of them; and we know, besides, that Juliet is not really dead. In *Hamlet* he is still using the trick, but he gives it dramatic validity. Hamlet, lashing himself into fury with his

Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain.

is sensible a second later that he is an ass to unpack his heart with words; and the thing is turned to frankly comic account in Polonius'

The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comic, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral. . .

while, for a normal use of it, we have that measured and balanced

How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable.¹ . . .

¹ Even as we have had in *Julius Cæsar*, but as speech planned to impress the hearers:

Brutus is noble, wise, valiant and honest;
Cæsar was mighty, bold, royal and loving. . .

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

A very common English means of emphasis is what may be called 'repetition by complement'; but, again, so common is this, its better-known locutions are so hackneyed, that their value is largely lost. 'Flesh and blood,' 'safe and sound,' 'hue and cry,' 'kith and kin,' 'use and wont'—these are worn currency indeed.¹ Shakespeare, in *Hamlet*, shows an extraordinary fondness for this device, and employs it, one would say, as carelessly as constantly. It may at times betoken the teeming mind—his own or his character's—finding two words as easily as one and too eager to be getting on to choose between them. The use of the conjunction makes smooth going for the verse, the familiar form and the bare addition to the meaning easy listening; and even when this last is negligible, as it is—to take four samples out of Hamlet's mouth alone in a single stretch of a single scene—in 'book and volume,' 'grace and mercy,' 'strange or odd,' 'love and friending,' the actor's voice can itself colour the second word to a richer implication. But the meaning is often definitely amplified or intensified; amplified in 'grunt and sweat'; in 'slings and arrows' a sense of piercing is added to a mere blow; and the suggestion in 'pitch and moment' carries us upward first and then on.² The sense is enlarged in 'fit and seasoned' and 'mortal and unsure' its force is modified in 'scourge and minister.'

The concrete imagery of a noun turned adjective

¹ For an extended list of them, and an interesting discussion of their use, see Logan Pearsall Smith's *Words and Idioms*.

² And that this is a complementary image is alone (I suggest) a reason for preferring Q2's 'pitch' to the Folio's 'pith.'

HAMLET

can add weight to the weightiest adjective, as with 'ponderous and marble jaws'; or the simple image may be elaborated and made beautiful, as in 'the morn and liquid dew of youth.' There is, on the other hand, little but redundancy in such a huddled couple of samples as

That monster, custom . . .
 . . . is angel yet in this,
 That to the use of actions *fair* and *good*
 He likewise gives a *frock* or *livery*. . . .

This comes, however, from a fatigued Hamlet in the slack-water of a scene. But surely, we feel, Shakespeare is conscious how tiresome the trick can be if it is over-employed when he gives us Rosencrantz' and Guildenstern's

Most *holy* and *religious* fear it is
To keep those *many many* bodies safe
That *live* and *feed* upon your majesty.
The *single* and *peculiar* life is bound
With all the *strength* and *armour* of the mind

and adds, within a few lines, a 'depends and rests' and a 'mortis'd and adjoin'd.'

A yet simpler and commoner device—to be found probably in all languages and literatures, since it reflects what must surely be a universal trick of the mind—is the reiterating of a single significant word, its use as a sort of refrain. As an encouraging watchword; in reiteration to persuade oneself or others that this or that is true; in the pulsing obsessions of temptation or remorse; under a dozen different forms the process is familiar.¹ Again, here is a device that the appren-

¹ Dervishes send themselves into a trance by continually repeating the name of Allah. And there is the Bellman's 'What I tell you three times is true,' which is the psychological basis of advertising.

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

tice Shakespeare found turned to an elaborate dramatic artifice; and as such, to begin with, he adopts it. We have it in its crudity in *Romeo and Juliet*; in *Richard II* for the sake of its musical charm; in *Henry V* the speech on Ceremony gives it careful employment; and it is appropriate to the oratory in *Julius Cæsar*. In *Hamlet* it is mere artifice no longer, its psychological rights are restored. We have Hamlet's 'obsessed iteration'—when he is summoned to her closet—of 'Mother . . . mother . . . mother', his

O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables,—meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile and smile and be a villain. . . .

his 'words, words, words,' and 'Sir . . . sir . . . sir' to Polonius. And there is the more elaborate flinging about between Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus and the Ghost of the 'swear . . . sworn . . . sword . . . in faith . . . indeed'; and here the mutual ringing of the changes of emphasis and tone on the reiterated words is like the weaving of a spell. The effect is now legitimately gained, and by no sacrifice of spontaneity; it is kept within the bounds of illusion.

The arresting image is not hard to find, nor one which fits character or occasion. Its employment will be another matter. However sharply it should arrest, it must not retain our attention while the action is moving ahead, and other images accumulate. Its clarity, then, its emotional force, the exact effect of it coming when and where it does; the dramatist must feel sure of all that. A painter uses much the same art in placing some object in

H A M L E T

a picture. Its independent importance apart, here it will have one value, there another, here help complete the composition, there only disintegrate it, or be itself ignored.

Shakespeare's sense of fitness, both to occasion and character, is very sure. He casts the play's first scene in verse; that lends it impulse and stimulus, dignifies the story's exposition, helps heighten the sense of mystery. But it is at the outset forthright plain stuff; Francisco and Bernardo are just 'honest soldiers' both, and their speech fits them. Marcellus strikes a slightly finer note. Only Horatio runs to relative clauses, allusion to Rome and 'the mightiest Julius,' and, towards the end - as if the supernatural had worked on his imagination - to imagery. We have the differing mental quality of the three men painted in Bernardo's

It was about to speak when the cock crew.

Marcellus'

The bird of dawning singeth all night long
and Horatio's

But, look, the morn'g sun doth mantle cloud,
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill . . .

With the action running smoothly, we may often follow by the thread of the imagery the very workings of a character's mind. It is the King's

How is it that the *clouds* still hang on you?

developed through the Queen's

Good Hamlet, cast thy *nighted* colour off. . . .

which seems to prompt Hamlet's own

'Tis not alone my *inky* cloak, good mother. . . .

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

And then we see him taking a sour sort of pleasure in elaborating the idea, which he has, so to speak, snatched from them; first adding 'customary suits' to 'solemn black'; next, cutting a layer inward, so to speak, with his 'forc'd breath . . . the fruitful river in the eye . . . dejected haviour of the visage', as if to warn them what they may be uncovering; finally, with his 'forms, modes, shows . . . trappings and . . . suits' rounding off the little parable, *his* variations upon *their* theme—and they and their courtiers may make what they will of it!

There are images which recur with the themes that prompted them. The world, to Hamlet, is

an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

Hamlet himself would be, the Ghost tells him,

duller . . . than the fat weed
That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf . . .

not to revenge his father's murder and his mother's shame. Gertrude is to find thorns lodged in her bosom to prick and sting her. And Hamlet pictures Claudius to her

like a mildewed ear,
Blasting his wholesome brother.

and adjures her to keep from him and not to

spread the compost on the weeds
To make them ranker.

But will the ordinarily attentive listener seize on this connection, spaced out, as it is, across more than half the play's length? That is the test of its dramatic validity. It is hard to say positively.

HAMLET

But the image is initially very strongly stressed; and no more notable place could be given it than it has; in Hamlet's first soliloquy (when we are all curiosity about him), where too it follows immediately upon the initial emotional outburst (when our attention is well held). Probably there will be at least half-conscious recognition, with something the same satisfaction in it as one gains from a half-remembered refrain in music, or the restoring of some half-forgotten phrase to one's memory.

A similar, if not so clearly connected a sequence, images yet more strongly the infectious corruption of Claudius, and Gertrude's sin. The Ghost's 'lust' that will 'prey on garbage'; Hamlet's 'maggots in a dead dog' (Polonius has suspected him, he knows, of lusting after Ophelia); his savage thought of 'fattening the region kites with this slave's offal'; his speech to his mother of the 'flattering unction' which

will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen.

his elaborate demonstration to Claudius of how that 'convocation of politic worms,' to whom Polonius is delivered, will before long be at him too, 'fat' and triumphant though he now is; the talk of 'pocky corpses,' dust and rottenness and the smell of mortality in the graveyard; Claudius' own

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven . . .

—the hearer cannot but be affected, consciously or subconsciously, by such an extended recurrence.

And in contrast to the weeds of Gertrude's sin we have flowers for Ophelia. Hamlet's garden

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

grown to seed has set against it in the very next scene Laertes' warning

The canker galls the infants of the spring
Too oft before their buttons be disclos'd,
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent . . .

and her own imaging of such danger is of a 'primrose path of dalliance.' Hamlet was for her

The expectancy and rose of the fair state . . .

and she to Laertes is a 'rose of May.' In her madness she plays with flowers; and, as if to clinch the apposition, the pitiful description of her death, garlanded with flowers, is given—to whom but Gertrude?

The play is, indeed, in one of its aspects a very edifice of related imagery; these three sequences, with their likenesses and contrasts, being but a part, if a salient one, of the whole. It is an edifice no more logically or rigidly constructed than are the schemes of time and place, but as adaptable as these are, a product of the natural economy of the poet's mind, a part of the general lively synthesis of idea which is, for the mature Shakespeare, dramatic form. He submits himself to no other.¹

The image must never be let pass, leaving us puzzled. A peculiar one in a passage speedy with passion must carry its explanation. To 'pigeon-livered' then, is added.

and lack gall
To make oppression bitter. . . .

¹ For a thoroughly documented study of Shakespeare's imagery, the student should turn to Dr. Caroline Spurgeon's book on the subject.

HAMLET

And if—like the birds in the basket and the famous ape—it needs much explanation, this is perhaps a sign that it had better not have been used.

On the other hand, though exceptionally, a passage crowded with a strange assortment of imagery may make a striking picture of the overwrought mind. But the thing needs to be cunningly done, and the confusion to be more apparent than real. There is Hamlet's speech while he waits for the Ghost to appear, about the 'vicious mole of nature' in a man which may corrupt him altogether; with its 'pales and forts of reason,' 'nature's livery,' 'fortune's star,' and 'dram of evil.'¹ There is the heavily overcharged passage in the scene with Gertrude; when, to his telling her that she is guilty of 'such an act' as

As false as doers' oaths
 makes marriage vows

he adds:

(O) such a deed
As from the body of contraction plucks
The very soul, and sweet religion makes
A rhapsody of words, heaven's face doth glow,
Yea, this solidity and compound mass,
With tristful visage, as against the doom,
Is thought-sick at the act

Spoken as this must be, in all the heat, with all the impulse of passion, the hearer will certainly not grasp its detailed meaning—which leaves, for that matter, editors still disputing. He is not altogether required to. The ‘body of contraction’ is a mere elaboration of the earlier ‘marriage vows,’ and ‘sweet religion’ (plainly derivative from ‘very

¹ For the dramatic purpose and effect of this, see pp. 50 *et seq.*

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

soul'), with 'rhapsody of words', makes a counterpart (therefore easily seized upon) to 'false as dicers' oaths'; and all this only leads up to the dominant 'Heaven's face doth glow . . .' That having made its clear and vivid effect, the magnificent hyperbole which follows—the 'solidity and compound mass . . . tristful visage . . . doom . . . thought-sick . . .'—is meant but to give us a vague sense of the whole world struck pale beneath God's wrath, a thing *not* to be understood but felt, not to be belittled by understanding. This is the *impression* Hamlet means to make on his mother, and Shakespeare on us.

When the elaborating of an image has to be swift and passionate and clear also, cadence and assonance may be put to use:

Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,
And melt in her own fire: proclaim no shame
When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
And reason panders will.

The sentence is evenly balanced. For a beginning the 'Rebellious hell, with its 'e's and doubled 'l's, is tellingly arresting. The repeated 'm's ('mutine . . . matron . . . flaming . . . melt') keep the tone of the lines level and clear. 'Proclaim no shame' sustains the clarity, while the initial doubled consonants and the half-open vowels (following for contrast upon the 'e's and 'i' of 'melt in her own fire') add strength and resonance. 'Compulsive' gives force to the manifest indignation of the fully open 'ardour' and 'charge,' and the doubled consonants of the final

H A M L E T

phrase demand and ensure perfect articulation, while its sibilants ('frost itself . . . reason panders') hiss contempt.

THE PROSE

Shakespeare does not try to keep the play at poetic pitch throughout; he has for long seen the dramatic unwisdom of that. But he has also passed beyond any simple mechanical division into poetry and prose; poetry for heroics and sentiment, prose for buffoonery. He has learnt how to modulate his verse with ease to the expressing of many moods; his prose, too; and to run the gamut, if he will, from the sublime to the commonplace without a break.

Verse prevails, of course. Not only is it by convention the dominant medium for such a play, but he needs, for his subject, its compelling and illusive power. Convention dictates prose for the gravediggers, and convenience its use for the commentary upon the versified *Murder of Gonzago*. For the rest, Shakespeare will always have, seemingly, a specifically dramatic reason for employing it.

The longest stretch of prose begins when Polonius 'boards' Hamlet, continues through the Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern examination in lunacy, the reception of the Players (*Æneas'* tale to Dido relieving it), and is suddenly, violently broken and ended by the outburst of

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I! . . .

The reason for its use here is obvious enough. The action is at a standstill; the impulse of verse would be wasted on it. Hamlet himself is adrift

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

upon the slack-water of doubt and impotence, no pulsing emotion left in him, nothing for poetry to express. The detached, sceptical mind--

What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! . . . And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? . . .

—inevitably speaks in prose.

We have prose for the quiet pessimism of the graveyard. What else is possible? How fatally verse would compromise the gentle gravity, the limpid clarity of

Alas! poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. . . .

As well try to put the eighteenth chapter of St. Luke into verse!

We have prose for the scene with Osric and the anonymous Lord; a dry prelude to the high-coloured drama of the final scene. The encounters with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and with Claudius after the play-scene are all cast in prose; this, I think, is to throw the harsh mask of Hamlet's eccentricities here into contrast with the soliloquies hereabouts and the scene with Gertrude (all cast in verse), in which we see his true visage. And he is made to break suddenly into prose in the scene with Ophelia, to shatter the delicate melody of her tendering back his gifts, her

Take these again; for to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.

with the strident

Ha, ha! are you honest? . . . Are you fair? . . . That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty . . .

—and so, seemingly, to shatter the last of the

H A M L E T

harmony between them and of the beauty of his love for her. As if for a reversal of the process, the prose of the graveyard scene shifts, with the arrival of that sorry little procession, to verse, stiff in cadence at first:

The Queen, the courtiers: who is this they follow?
And with such maimed rites? This doth betoken
The corse they follow did with desperate hand
Fordo its own life. . . .

but kindling to the anguish of

I lov'd Opheliâ: forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum . . .

for which prose would never do.

We may say that, in the main, the prose Hamlet is never the innermost man. For the expression of that—of the combination of thought and feeling, instinct and impulse, and of the twilight travail of the spirit which has place there—only poetry will serve.

THE VERSE

Shakespeare's dramatic verse may be said to flow from two founts: the 'lyric' (so to call it) and the rhetorical. His own earliest bent, we are disposed to presume, was towards the delicate discipline of the lyric, and to expanding this, much as Lyly had done, for dramatic use; though—and it at once made a difference—he had men to work for, not children, the virile note must be struck. And if his vein of heroic rhetoric was not quite so happily his own, this—though only for his theatre's and actors' sake—had to be cultivated too. He was soon doing masterly work enough of the kind.

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

In the earlier plays we can sometimes see the currents running side by side and blending here and there. And he disciplines his rhetoric by learning to put it to more strictly dramatic use, letting his captains and kings and orators find him proper occasion for it. But it is, both for dramatist and actor, a deplorably easy sort of stuff to 'unpack.' We have a mischievous fling at its extravagances embodied in *Ancient Pistol*. And he is taking at the time ever more extensive refuge in the exactitudes of prose.

There is a sense in which all dramatic speech must have in it something of the enhancement of poetry. It may be given by such a convention as in French classic tragedy forbids the very use of 'common' words, by which a spade may be nothing less 'noble' than an agricultural implement. This is not a mere piece of literary affectation, but a logical development of the convention employed; nobility of poetic substance being added to the nobility of poetic form to make, with the other conventions of time and place, a flawless unity of impression. Or the enhancement may be cunningly condensed within seemingly commonplace talk. But there it must be. If speech is to be made to 'carry' in the theatre it must have in it some quality equivalent— for a comparison— to the effective 'length' of a well-bowled cricket ball. Nor, in Shakespeare's theatre, of all others, can this poetic enhancement be surrendered. For there speech has to fulfil a multiple purpose. Not only must it be shaped and coloured to the exhibiting of character, but the play's story has to be told far more fully and vividly than the modern dramatist will tell it, the continuous action continuously

H A M L E T

explained and its background suggestively filled in too. For the creating and sustaining on the bare stage of a whole illusionary world the dramatist has little other resource than picturesque and persuasive speech.

All poets, presumably, test their lines by ear as they write them, if not by speech. But with Shakespeare dramatic *writing* was for convenience of record merely; his verse was not only conceived as speech, it was to be so born and only so meant to exist. He provided music for an orchestra of living individual voices that he knew. As nearly as might be, he spoke through his actors. It is the mere notation of this once-living music which remains. Precise notation, moreover, it could not be made. Write for mechanical instruments in a recognised alphabet of crotchets and quavers, tones and semi-tones, with a metronome marking to rule all, and a large liberty will still be left to the interpreters. And human speech is both more flexible and less biddable than that.¹ Nor does

¹ No instrument can be made to compete in variety and significance of expression with the cultured human voice naturally used. Nor, surely, can any system of notation, any conceivable combination of symbols be devised which will represent the scope of its resources. The usual phonetic alphabet very certainly does not. Whatever the uses of this may be (it was a practical means of recording living speech till the gramophone superseded it), a language learnt by reliance on it is bound to be inexpressively spoken, if nothing further is done which may set the ear and tongue free from its restraints. A man who has learnt a language phonetically speaks it as a deaf man does. A student must hear the music of a language, and the best thing is probably to set him

Shakespeare, as he develops dramatically, will discipline his speakers in measure and cadence. He is not aiming at precision of form, but at an illusion of life. His verse accords ever less to measure than to rhythm and stress. Its unity is in an overriding rhythm, its expressiveness in the varying of the stress. Let the actor submit himself to the prevailing rhythm of a passage—he has, presumably, an ear for music and an accordant voice—and he will find that the very cadence of a line gives him its dramatic import, its very melody the due content of emotion. He will note how the shifting of a cæsura, the elision or addition of syllables, an assemblage of consonants or profusion of vowels are meant to help produce this or that effect; and he must master the gymnastics of it. But he had then better put such mechanical matters from his mind. For there will be no one correct way of speaking a line or a passage. Within the range of the form Shakespeare invites him to share in the freedom he himself has won—this life-like freedom. He must first have gained, of course, as intimate a sympathy as may be with Shakespeare's meaning; and the soundness of his sympathy he can test by translating this into his own terms—in just about so much critical detachment from his author may the actor indulge. Then, all study done, let him, as a conscious instrument, simply attune himself to the character he is to play; and he will find it—there is no very rational accounting for the phenomenon—speaking freely

searching for it; for its melodies and cadences in its poetry, and, where English is concerned, in dramatic poetry, since there melody and cadence are at their freest and most characteristic.

H A M L E T

through him, and, within the measure of his sympathy, rightly too.

There is little pedestrian verse in the play; though Voltimand's account of his mission and a few other such utilitarian passages may be so labelled. But such a one, for instance, as the opening scene's narrative of the Fortinbras quarrel—which might easily be so—is saved by being set in circumstances tensely dramatic in themselves. Horatio, harrowed 'with fear and wonder' by one sight of the ghost, has mind and nerve braced for the next, and puts them to the proof of concentration on his story—whence the close-knit, well-stressed verse, precise in statement, driven rather than flowing along:

Our last king,
Whose image even but now appear'd to us,
Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway,
Thereto prick'd on by a most emulate pride,
Dau'd to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet—
For so this side of our known world esteem'd him—
Did slay this Fortinbras, who, by a seal'd compact . .

parenthesis preferred to digression, for thus the speech ploughs straight forward; and if this lengthens the line or displaces a caesura, so much the better, for the speaker must then, to keep the rhythm true, speed over the subordinate matter. Melody may be sacrificed to emphasis; ease will not be let prejudice strength.

Now, sir, young Fortinbras,
Of unimproved mettle hot and full,
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
Shark'd up a list of lawless resolute . . .

Note in this how the familiär 'Now, sir, young

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

Fortinbras . . .' entices our attention for the compressed exactitude of the second line, even as the free flow of the third (its one significant word, 'in the *skirts* of . . .' lodged mid-way; it is not Norway's self that is preparing war) makes easy approach to the richly descriptive

Shark'd up a list of lawless resolute . . .

--which asks some assimilation.

It is only after the Ghost has come again and gone and the tension is relaxed that the verse turns melodious and picturesque, with

The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn,
Doth with his lottty and shrill-sounding throat
Awake the god of day; and, at his warning,
Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air,
The extravagant and erring spirit hies
To his confine. . . .

--and so on. Not, that is to say, until Shakespeare has achieved his dramatic purpose does he indulge in a little scene-painting. The lonely dark and cold of the beginning have been somehow blended into the curt exchanges of the two men relieving guard, made part of the action itself.

The verse will always respond better to a dramatic than a prosodic analysis. In Polonius' injunctions to Ophelia to beware of Hamlet's courtship:

I do know,
When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows: these blazes, daughter,
Giving more light than heat, extinct in both,
Even in their promise, as it is a-making,
You must not take for fire. From this time
Be somewhat scanter of your maiden presence. . . .

H A M L E T

The third line and the sixth are prosodically short. Pope sets things right with a 'These blazes, O, my daughter,' and various editors follow him. Capell improves it to 'gentle daughter,' and even Coleridge says 'A spondee has, I doubt not, dropped out of the text.'¹ The sixth line the Folio itself amends to

You must not take for fire. From this time, daughter . . .
—and the reading has been authoritatively defended; and, if condemned, partly so on the grounds that the line, as it stands in Q₂, can be made regular by treating 'fire' as a dissyllable.²

But approach the question from the dramatic point of view and there is no difficulty. A mid-line pause is needed if the sequent 'these blazes, daughter . . .' is to be emphatically attacked; and, as Polonius' lines are meant in general to ripple on their way unchecked, a pause of this sort must be specifically indicated. In the sixth line there is the pause again, put to the same use. And how can any sensitive speaker miss the increased emphasis, the 'No nonsense now!' of the three monosyllables, 'From this time . . .', with those two firm 'm's' comprised in them? As directions to the actor nothing could be plainer; and that is what Shakespeare is putting on paper.³

¹ Quoted from Furness: *Apparatus criticus* and footnote.

² Dover Wilson says that the second 'daughter' here is simply a careless repetition of the first—by, presumably, the transcriber or compositor. I think it as likely and likelier that some actor was the original culprit. He had caught the garrulous flow of the verse, and had ceased to mark the effect Shakespeare makes by these occasional checks to it.

³ This trick (so, not depreciatively, to call it) is something of a favourite with Shakespeare. Take, for an instance, in *Julius Cæsar*, Cassius'

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

The Polonius tune is unmistakable, and it connotes him to a nicety. The lines, over full of weak syllables, run rippling along till they seem to be about to run off the rails of the metre altogether, the flow only arrested now and then, while the old gentleman takes breath and collects his thoughts, by a 'Mark you,' a 'See you now,' or a 'Perpend.' Once, indeed, when he loses the thread of his discourse about Laertes, they do run off the rails into two or three lines of prose; and Reynaldo has, so to speak, to help him on again.

There is with Polonius, a stiffening of stricter lines; for though wiseacre, he is no mere babbling fool. The famous 'precepts' go to a steady measure, to a melody distinguished enough, if dry. But these belong to a conception of the character afterwards somewhat modified.¹ He can drive his royal master and mistress to distraction with

That he is mad, 'tis true; 'tis true 'tis pity,
And pity 'tis 'tis true. . . .
Mad let us grant him, then; and now remains
That we find out the cause of this effect,
Or, rather, say, the cause of this defect,
For this effect defective comes by cause . . .

—satire as it is besides upon much such mental and verbal jugglery in contemporary literature and drama; not a little to be found in Shakespeare's own work! But the adroit politician in him can

I, as Æneas our great ancestor
Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder
The old Anchises bear, so, from the waves of Tiber,
Did I the tired Cæsar. And this man
Is now become a god.

¹ See p. 253.

HAMLET

pass, for a peroration, to the plain, practical

You know, sometimes he walks four hours together
Here in the lobby. . . .
At such a time I'll loose my daughter to him. . . .
Mark the encounter; if he love her not
And be not from his reason fall'n thereon,
Let me be no assistant for a state
But keep a farm and carters.

—with its steady beat, the tense consonants and broad vowels of its conclusion. For all Polonius in a single line take, however, the parenthetic, casual

As 'twere a thing a little soil'd i' the working... .

There, in sense as in sound Laertes' depravity to be lightly accepted; and in the clipped syllables, the pinched consonants, the thin vowels, the tripping acidity of it—the old worldling is epitomized.

The verse at times may not so much express the speaker's own character as reflect either the occasion or the quality of the person spoken to. But this is dramatically justifiable. People do take the moment's colour of some vivid experience, or self-forgetfully suppress themselves in their care for others. And no more assurance is needed of Laertes' love for Ophelia than the limpid simplicity of the verse of his farewell to her, which paints her character, not his own. He will be self-expressive enough when he returns to avenge his father. But, even then, at the sight or thought of her, his verse always yields to the tune of her again. And the Queen, as we have noted, quite forgets herself in her description of the girl's death.¹ It is, indeed, only her father and Hamlet who do

¹ Cf. p. 155.

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

not yield in this fashion to Ophelia's defenceless innocence. Even Claudius is pitiful to her.

But it is true also that Laertes is— even as Gertrude is—an unstable character. And this Shakespeare paints for us, before we have other proof of it, in the violence and exaggeration of his phrase, and the quick ranging from one extreme to another; from the

To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation . . .

through the strained

O heat, dry up my brains! tears seven times salt
Burn out the sense of virtue of mine eye! . . .

to— after the more spontaneous

O rose of May!
Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!

the conceit of

Nature is fine in love, and where 'tis fine
It sends some precious instance of itself
After the thing it loves.

That image of 'the kind life-rendering pelican' is for him, and at the moment rather forced and false; and a little later Ophelia is

A sister driven into desperate terms,
Whose worth, if praises may go back again,
Stood challenger on mount of all the age
For her perfections

Continually, amid his naturally plainer speech, there come strokes of this sort; till we reach the leaping in the grave, and the

Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead,
Till of this flat a mountain you have made
To o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head
Of blue Olympus*

--and Hamlet gibes at his ranting. This is char-

H A M L E T

acter painting in a poetic medium; and the technique is legitimate.

*

Save in his soliloquies, the King's verse can hardly be expressive of him, only of the mask he wears, or the occasion he is improving. But this, to a nicety, it is. And such, besides, are the metaphysical resources of the poetry, its powers of suggestion by tone, cadence and rhythm, that enough of what is behind the mask can be implied. The well-balanced sentences of the address to the Council are proper to the occasion; but are they not a thought too well-balanced? The reproof to Hamlet, with each epithet doubling the weight of its noun ('obsequious sorrow . . . obstinate condolence . . . impious stubbornness') and, after a moment, epithet and noun artfully turned about ('heart unfortified . . . mind impatient . . . understanding simple and unschooled') is not this a little too calculated; even as the contrasted silky kindness to Laertes a minute since has surely been a thought too smooth?¹ The silky smoothness is still there in the welcome to 'dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern', the thanks betimes to 'Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern.' Even the Ambassadors earn an elaborately considerate

It likes us well,
And at our more consider'd time we'll read,
Answer, and think upon this business.
Meantime we thank you for your well-took labour:
Go to your rest; at night we'll feast together:
Most welcome home!

¹ One is even tempted to imagine that Shakespeare chose that most unlikely name because it sounded so smoothly here in the King's mouth.

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

The revealing soliloquy after the play-scene moves to a very different measure:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder! . . .

The verse throughout this is dry and unyielding. The sense is inconsiderate of it. It is hammered out, and the accent never falls happily upon the illuminating word. It gives us the true temper of the man; acute, capable, tenacious, but insensible.

With Hamlet a plain danger to him, the smooth mask of kindness may be dropped. But through the exhibition of his judicial severity comes the sound of his fear. We hear it in the too-sustained stresses of

How dangerous is it that this man goes loose!
Yet must not we put the strong law on him:
He's loved of the distracted multitude. . .

—the levelled lines and the suppression of the *cæ*sura, giving us the sense of a forced draught of thought; even as in

To bear all smooth and even,
This sudden sending him away must seem
Deliberate pause. Diseases desperate grown
By desperate appliance are relieved
Or not at all.

its displacement and the clumsy mid-line re-starting help to suggest the speaker checked and harassed by—such secret and unavowable things as do, nevertheless, find some expression in the mere dentals and hisses of 'This sudden sending . . . deliberate pause . . . Diseases desperate grown . . . desperate appliance . . .' There is dread and hate in the very vowels and consonants.

H A M L E T

But he shows admirable courage and address in his encounter with the revolted Laertes; and once again we have the gentle caressing cadences, in the

Calmly, good Laertes . . .
What is the cause, Laertes,
That thy rebellion looks so giant-like?
. . . Tell me, Laertes,
Why thou art thus incensed?

and, later, in that

Laertes, was your father dear to you . . .
in the insinuating

Not that I think you did not love your father . . .
and the winning simplicity of the repeated

But that I know. . . .
And that I see

— phrase after phrase flowing so smoothly one into the other. Here are the ‘witchcraft of his wit’ and the ‘traitorous gifts’ in full play. To just such a tune, indeed, was Gertrude wooed and won. Hence the importance of the scene in the up-building of the character.

Hamlet, the student and thinker, is much alive to the import of words. His very first utterance is a bitter pun.¹ And the speech that follows, with its ‘. . . inky cloak . . . windy suspiration of forc’d breath . . . fruitful river in the eye’ shows him nice in his choice of them, for sound and sense combined. He is speaking in public, of course; deliberately and for effect.

¹ A pun with Shakespeare, needless to say, was not necessarily a comic thing at all.

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

Yet words come easily to him, and he takes an artistic pleasure in them. Imagination finds them for him quicker than thought will; there is delight in that. And, stirred by passion, he will pile them up, phrase upon phrase, until he seems possessed by words—and he despises the futile satisfaction of it. For words themselves he distrusts; they also are things which ‘seem,’ ‘the trappings and the suits’ of reality, tricking the speaker as often as the hearer; and they are a weak man’s weapon. Hamlet, in fact, despises in himself one of his chief abilities, and this is a part of the discord which disables him.

There is other witness to this than the notable

This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder’d,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words . . .

The

Words, words, words!

thrown at the wordy old Polonius is a lightly ironic echo from the same source. The phrase used to the Queen:

and sweet religion makes
A rhapsody of words . . .

cuts deeper, and deeper still the out-matching of the rhetoric of Laertes’ grief, and the bitter comment.

Nay, an thou’lt mouth,
I’ll rant as well as thou

But not all the rational means of expression of which he is master will suffice him for self-explanation. Very naturally they will not. How should a mode of speech framed for the conveying of

HAMLET

ordered thought, and common to all the world, be adequate to the elucidating of the mysterious conflict within him—of this madness, as it seems to all the world: and he himself has no better name for it? He needs must express himself in poetry, the language of metaphysical things, in which words can be given almost as mysterious a potency. But even in this he has to search for strange images, and break all bounds in his effort to bring to terms those

thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls.

It is by no convention that Shakespeare casts Hamlet into terms of poetry – and the prose is as poetic as the verse. He could be expressed by no other means. For he also is essentially and perforce a poet.

Again, the dramatic value of the verse lies, not in its sense only, but in its melody and rhythm. The first soliloquy:

O! that this too too solid flesh would melt . . .

is an emotional piece of music. The second:

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I! . . .

is a passionate one. Its gestating thought is compressed into the next seven lines, poured out without pause. But the culminating

For Hecuba! . . .

is given a line's length to itself. Then comes a section of eight lines:

What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze[•]indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears. . . .

Here we have a line and a half, the half-line stayed by a query at the normal point of the cæsure. Next comes a sentence accounting for the rest of the line; a full line; and a line hardly begun before it is broken—by a query again, but this time more abruptly. The rest is another unchecked rush—and speech and ear alike deal easily with the simply articulated sentence and the consecutive thought—its ending, however, suspended in mid-air. Again a culminating, significant two words are given a line's length's value:

Yet I!

And a four-and-a-half line section follows; the first two—to compensate for the preceding hysteria—ballasted and retarded by the speaker's need to fabricate 'dull and muddy-mettled. . . . peak like John-a-dreams, unpregnant . . .'¹

Thereafter the more regular lines, coming two or three together, serve to send the speech forward on an even keel; while a crowded one intervening, a

Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' the throat . . .
or a

Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain! . . .

¹ The repeated queries, with their effect of indrawn breath, help to suggest hysteria. And such a line as

What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?

can, by reversing the natural process of the aspirates, actually be spoken so, no vocal tone being required. That will have been supplied in the immediately preceding 'Hecuba.'

HAMLET

bespeak the choking passion; and a line's length allowed (yet again) to no more than a 'Ha!' or an 'O, vengeance' tell now of strength unequal to the strain.¹ Q2 even eloquently prints the petering out of the storm as

And fall a-cursing, like a very diab; a stallyon, fie uppon't!
foh!

Then follows thought:

About, my brain! Hum, I have heard
That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions. . . .

Metrically, the first line here is two beats short. Dramatically it is, of course, nothing of the kind, for the actor will speak it more or less thus:

About, my brain! Hum-m-m I've heard . .

This, with the four following regular, smoothly running lines (exceptionally regular: 'presently' and 'malefactions' given their fullest syllabic value), and the succeeding similar five, give us the brain as smoothly at work. Only one of the nine lines is irregular, the centre one of these three:

For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father . . .

--

¹ 'O, vengeance' is, however, the Folio's only; and personally I suspect it to be an actor's interpolation. The next line in the Folio is deplorably weakened by the insertion of an 'I sure,' which everyone agrees to reject. In Q2 the thought travels from the abuse of Claudius directly to the 'Why, what an Ass am I' The Folio's 'O, vengeance' only prejudices by anticipation the entry of the idea upon

Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell. . . .

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

But it is the decisive line. Also its *cæsura* coincides with the end of a sentence. This involves a pause; the effect of that being to shorten the final word to 'org'n' - as if it died on the speaker's lips as the capital 'I'll have these players' came into his mind. The breath taken between the sentences involves also the shortening of the line's last word to 'play'rs'; but that, again, prevents it from prejudicing the more important initial 'Play . . .' of the next line.

This ten-and-a-half line section of the evolving of his plan, which has followed the exhausting emotional outbreak, ends half-way through a line upon the

I know my course.

And, again, the *cæsura* becomes also an interval between sentences, and the line's completing must be contracted more or less to

The spirit that I've seen . . .

-not so ugly a contraction in the speaking as in the writing. Except for the one main division between the speech's passion and its thought, every 'section' in it does cad in mid-line, but that minimises the slight pause involved and helps to keep the speech a single whole. The very first line, in fact, to end with a definite full stop is the last - and that has its rhyme -the first and only one -to stress this:

The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

It is a musical full close.

The 'To be or not to be . . .' soliloquy is just such dramatic music also. The sentences, each

H A M L E T

drawn out over four or five lines, the even cadences, suggest the sustained tension of thought; and she iterated

To die; to sleep!
No more; and by a sleep . . .
To die, to sleep!
To sleep . . .

the pendulum swing of insoluble doubt.

*

The scansion test for a line—of Hamlet's or any other—will always be the dramatic one. Take such a passage as

Touching this vision here,
It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you:
For your desire to know what is between us,
O'ermaster't as you may And now, good friends,
As you are friends, scholars and soldiers,
' Give me one poor request.

Hamlet is, for the moment, tartly on the defensive against any prying into his secret. Note the admonitory whip-lash in the elided end of each line; in the 'vis'n here . . . tell y' . . . between's'. And the 'o'ermaster't'—Q₂ actually spells it 'Oremastret'—is yet more peremptory. But, to mark his quick apologetic revulsion to friendliness, practically no pause is allowed between this and the

And now, good friends . . .

The four simple but progressively weighty monosyllables are in themselves an appeal, and they prelude the more persuasive

As you are friends, scholars and soldiers . . .

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

But if this is to be syllabically scanned :

As/ you/ are/ friends/ scho/ lars/ and/ sol/ di/ ers/

it will not be persuasive at all. Hamlet is standing with Horatio and Marcellus, the scholar and the soldier, at either side of him, and appealing to them together and individually. And what he says is

As y' are friends// schol'rs// and soldy'rs//

--as far as such symbols can make it clear. The effect lies in the weight and significance given to the three capital words by the slight pause allowed for after each ; pauses which, by a skilled speaker, can be made to count in the rhythm without imperilling it in the least.

*

Lastly, for an example of cadence, colour and rhythm turned to dramatic account. dictating the reading, defining the meaning of the lines, take the passage in which Horatio and his two companions reveal to Hamlet that his father's spirit is in arms. For malleable ease and nervous vitality combined there is, moreover, probably no piece of verse-dialogue in all Shakespeare to touch it.

Horatio. Hail to your lordship¹

Hamlet. I'm glad to see you well :

Horatio, - or I do forget myself.

Horatio. The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.

Hamlet. Sir, my good friend ; I'll change that name with you.

And what make you from Wittenberg, Horatio ?
Marcellus !

Marcellus. My good lord.

Hamlet. I'm very glad to see you. (*to Bernardo*) Good
e'en, sir. . . .

HAMLET

The main rhythm gives us speed without haste, and prevails over the minor lapses from it. Note the elided endings of 'lordship' and 'Horatio.' The first is customary. The second has dramatic point: glad surprise rings out upon the resonant 'a,' and the practical suppression of the two last vowels allows for the slightest of pauses in which the gladness can be felt. There is the short line for the more perfunctory greeting of Marcellus, and a return to metre for the amending courtesy—which still takes Bernardo in its stride, for Hamlet's thoughts are on Horatio—of

I'm very glad to see you—Good e'en, sir

Then, drawing him apart, he can devote himself to his friend:

But what in faith, make you from Wittenberg?

Horatio A truant disposition, good my lord!

Hamlet I would not hear you encourage so,
Nor shall you do mine ear that violence,
To make it trustor of your own report
Against yourself, I know you are no truant
But what is your affair in Elsinore?

We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart

Horatio My lord, I came to see your father's funeral

Hamlet I prithee do not mock me, fellow-student,
I think it was to see my mother's wedding

Horatio Indeed my lord, it followed hard upon

Hamlet Thrift, thrift, Horatio! the funeral baked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables
Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio
My father! Methinks I see my father

Horatio O! where, my lord?

Hamlet In my mind's eye, Horatio

Horatio I saw him once, he was a goodly king

Hamlet He was a man, take him for all in all,
I shall not look upon his like again.

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

The rhythm flows easily and evenly ; with Horatio, and only with him, is Hamlet continually at ease.

Note the effect made by the double echo of the unusual cadence of Horatio's

My Lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

There is irony in the very refrain :

I pri'three, do not mock me, fellow-student ;
I think it was to see my mother's wedding.

And, while the words themselves say little, the strict scansion, that firm, five times repeated ' d,' and the bitten final ' n' of

Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon.

bespeak a Horatio sternly if discreetly of Hamlet's mind about it.

The short space allowed in the line to ' Thrift, thrift . . . ' tells a Hamlet that, despite their ten consonants to two vowels, he is to speak the words lightly. There is distaste in the very ' b . . . k . . . d . . . m . . . ts ' of the ' funeral baked meats,' with which it more levelly ends, and contempt in the repeated ' f's ' of the ' furnish forth.' The last line of the speech must be scanned dramatically :

My fath'r !/ Methinks I see, my fath'r !/

more or less. Allot it its ten written syllables, it will prove practically unspeakable.

Note Hamlet's frequent repetition hereabouts of his friend's name. The word is gentle in itself, and he is always at his gentlest with Horatio ; nor ever, till he is dying, gentler than at this moment, for he is no longer lonely in his grief, and the deadlier blow has not yet befallen him.

H A M L E T

This section of the scene ends with three simple lines; their rhythm exact; their words—three excepted—of one syllable, fit frame for their simplicity of content. The first line is Horatio's

I saw him once; he was a goodly king.

and, once more, two succeeding lines from Hamlet repeat the cadence; but accordantly, not ironically, this time:

He was a man, take him for all in all,
I shall not look upon his like again.

The three curt final 'king . . . all . . . again' give a certain sense of finality too. But we know, with Horatio, that here is rather a beginning than an end.¹ And this repetition with a difference of the three-line duct, the closer drawn accord between the two, the touch of a finality which we know is none, make quietly arresting preparation for the revealing:

My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

This fires the train; and from this point the excitement mounts step by step to the scene's crisis, Hamlet's

I will watch to-night. . . .

The text embodies clear directions to the actors. Hamlet's

Saw! Who?

¹ Incidentally, this echoed cadence, as a test, condemns the reading, once beloved of actors:

He was a man. Take him for all in all . . .

by which Hamlet was oddly made to imply that kings as kings were not of much account.

THE VERSE AND THE PROSE

is allowed the length of a line. His share of the next line, the echoed

The king my father!

must—the verse demanding an elided ‘fath’r’—fade away into breathless wonder. Horatio, with his

Upon the witness of these gentlemen . . .

brings Marcellus and Bernardo into focus; and the action is at once broadened and strengthened; for, the tale told, Hamlet will have the three to attend to and question. The subsequent dialogue between the four of them falls at first into the regular rhythm of the verse, though the lines are broken.

Horatio. I knew your father.

These hands are not more like.

Hamlet. But where was this?

Marcellus. My lord, upon the platform where we watched.

Hamlet. Did you not speak to it?

Horatio My lord, I did;

But answer made it none.

Hamlet. Indeed, indeed, sirs, but this troubles me.

Hold you the watch to-night?

Marcellus { We do, my lord

Bernardo {

Hamlet. Armed, say you?

Marcellus { Armed, my lord.

Bernardo {

Hamlet From top to toe?

Marcellus { My lord, from head to foot

Bernardo {

Hamlet. Then saw you not his face? . . .

from which point—the rushed ‘saw’y’ not’ initiating it—the beat degenerates into a scurry, with the stiffening here and there of a more regular line to prevent the rhythm from disintegrating altogether. The quick unhesitating give and take

H A M L E T

within the continuous rhythm gives us Hamlet's mind keen to absorb all that the three can tell him as fast as they can tell it; the *breaking* of the rhythm marks the breaking of this close contact of attention; and his lapse to such *detachment* from it as

Very like, very like! Stayed it long?

shows us his thought questing beyond their ken.

His mind made up, the verse returns to the consistent strength of

If it assume my noble father's person
I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape
And bid me hold my peace. I pray you all,
If you have hitherto concealed this sight,
Let it be tenable in your silence still . . .

which is maintained to the scene's end.¹

¹ Neither Q₂ nor Folio displays this dialogue as verse, nor, it may well be, did Shakespeare in his manuscript. The construction would be clear in his mind, and he could tell the actors at rehearsal how to piece their bits together. This could not be done for them in their 'parts,' which would contain their own lines and cues only. And if he wrote these passages (and the many similar ones) as Q₂ vertically displays them, that was probably for the convenience of the prompter, who had not then to cast his eye clear across the line from *Hamlet* to 'From top to toe?' or from *Horatio* to 'In faith,' at a continual risk of error during rehearsals, when prompting is often continuous; and the man who had to copy out the parts would be liable to make similar mistakes. Were Shakespeare not at rehearsals, the prompter and the actors might here and there be hard put to it to reconstruct the verse -- even as the editors have sometimes been since. Yet the actors would have highly trained ears; and the rhythm, if they yielded to it, would assert itself. But compare this with the careful setting out of (say) certain scenes in Jonson's *Sejanus*.

THE CHARACTERS

FRANCISCO AND A FEW FUNCTIONARIES

THE minor characters in *Hamlet* are not highly developed, nor but for two or three—very sharply individualised. There is more than one reason for this. They may be figures from the old play, whom Shakespeare has not been at the pains to transform. But even if he has, or let the character be originally his own, should it move in Hamlet's orbit - and what in the play does not? - it will tend to turn satellite, moon to his sun. Opposition of character to character is the very life of drama. Yet even of the King and Queen, of Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia, it may be said that, in contact with Hamlet, they put up little more than is needed to keep them their place. We learn most about them when they are free of him; yet of some consciousness of him they are never free.

But Shakespeare can by now, if he will, give his actor matter enough for a vivid sketch of character in fifty words. Franc. o, at the play's opening, speaks just fifty-five. He is on guard. Bernardo approaches; so nervous we learn why in a moment—that he does not, as he should, wait to be challenged, but acts out a

Who's there?

Nay, answer me, stand, and unfold yourself!

Long live the King!

Bernardo?

He.

You come most carefully upon your hour.

H A M L E T

'Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed, Francisco.
For this relief much thanks; 'tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart.
Have you had quiet guard?

Not a mouse stirring.

In that short swift exchange between the two, place, time and season are given us, Bernardo's strung-up nerves, his arrival so carefully upon his hour lest the Ghost appear to Francisco, who evidently knows nothing and had better be kept ignorant; and we have the sharply bitten-in sketch of the 'honest soldier' too, brusque of manner, terse of speech, not insensitive to the haunted atmosphere, choosing to account for feeling 'sick at heart' on the plain fact that 'tis bitter cold.'

Is this too curious an analysis to be valid. If ordinary reader does not find it all in the *elements*—but he can if he will look—well, they were written for reading. If it be said that the actor, in the few minutes of their speaking and acting, cannot take in so much, this is not the question either. We are not asked to *unpack* the matter out, or given the time to. What we have here, packed into the dialogue, are stage directions to the actors; it is material for the effect they are to make on us, and this effect will be, in the strict meaning of the word, *sensational*; and if we did, at the moment, analyse the sensation and realise how it was made, the effect of it would be largely lost.¹

We see no more of Francisco; and such vivid minor characters are apt to disappear from a play

¹ Though it is, of course, possible, without wholly sacrificing the sensation, to gain a consciously critical pleasure in the art of the business too.

THE CHARACTERS

when they have served their sensational turn. Barnardine in *Measure for Measure*, sent to his death to remind us of the sinister realities of that so-called comedy; Cinna the poet and the jiggling rhymester in Brutus' tent, dashing revolution and war with ridicule of the worth of poetry in such times---to elaborate these lively sketches would give them a distracting importance, to prolong their existence merely would commensurately diminish their value.

To another category of minor parts belong the Ambassadors and the Players. They are units in the machinery of the action, functionaries, little more. Characterless characters of the kind are to be found in every play. The individualities of the actors lend them individuality enough. They furnish something of that indifferent background which life itself provides to all poignant spectacles. Voltimand and Cornelius are appropriately colourless. The message from Norway is a formal one; they are the mere instruments of its delivery. Upon the players Shakespeare does throw enough reflected life--reflected in Hamlet's kindly greeting to them, in his

Dost hear me, old friend. . . .

and his care for their good treatment--to remind us that players are human beings too.

HORATIO

Horatio dwells in Hamlet's shadow, yet he is very much himself; and (again) few things are more difficult in drama than to give a character standing of its own, except by setting it in opposition

HAMLET

to others, and enkindling it, so to speak, by friction.

But he is established in our knowledge before ever Hamlet appears. He dominates the first scene. Not by any insistence upon himself; that would belie him. It is in his talk of the chances of war with Norway, in his attitude towards the Ghost, that he incidentally discloses himself as a conservatively patriotic and 'educated gentleman. He takes pride in the dead king's fame and disparages the lawless young Fortinbras; and besides Marcellus' word for it that he is a scholar, we have him citing his Plutarch. He is level-headed and open-minded. The Ghost, when he heard of it, was a 'fantasy'; but seeing is believing. Yet he has neither fear of it, for he stays it and speaks to it; nor any superstitious respect for it, since he encourages the frightened Marcellus to strike at it with his partisan. For him it will be what it is proved to be. Yet he is sensitive too. He steadies his nerves for the second sight of it; but he trembled and turned pale when it first appeared. And in his final

But look, the morn in russet mantle clad
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill . . .

a gentle spirit speaks.

MARCELLUS; BERNARDO

Marcellus and Bernardo can best be dealt with in a parenthesis here, for they are what they are as a part of the scheme of this first scene. They strike each his complementary and contrasting note in it. Of the three men Bernardo (though nervous

THE CHARACTERS

enough at the outset) is the stolidest. Horatio looks to him for some mitigating of Marcellus' fantastic tale. He observes the 'thing' when it appears more exactly than do the others, and, a moment later, is bantering the converted sceptic:

How now, Horatio! you tremble and look pale.
Is not this something more than fantasy?

For the rest, he says what he has to say as plainly and shortly as possible.

Marcellus is of finer temper, and the whole mysterious business has hit the more sharply on edge. What does it portend? He has not dared speak to the Ghost himself. When Horatio, armoured in scholarship, does, and it will not answer, he fears it is offended. As timorously as desperately he makes to strike at it with his partisan, and at once repents.

We do it wrong, being so municipal
To offer it the show of violence.

The supernatural is very real to him.

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawn ing singeth all night long,
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;
The night are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hat power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is the time

to which Horatio answers.

So I have heard, and do in part believe it

saving himself, even at this heroic moment, by the 'in part' from too much credulity. Marcellus, we notice also, is anxious for Hamlet to be told;

H A M L E T

it is he who—to turn their minds from the Ghost—sets Horatio recounting the reasons for the ‘strict and most observant watch’ and all the ‘post-haste and rummage in the land’; he who, in the later scene, at its most poignant moment, breaks out with

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

As we watch the scene, intent on the story it tells, we may not notice—may not positively remark—such points and aspects of character. But (once again) these things are stage directions to the actors, material by which the scene can be convincingly built up. The matter-of-fact Bernardo, who has seen what he has seen; Marcellus, alive to the mystery beyond; Horatio, won from doubt to belief—within that likely combination we find our own transient belief in what we see.

All good dramatic writing has this double content; the overt, with which the immediate effect is made; the covert, in which the actor finds guidance for the modelling of the figure by which that effect is to be made. And the less prominent the character, the less imposing its immediate effects, the greater the need for this modelling to be complete.

HORATIO, *resumed*

Hamlet's affectionate welcome of him adds to Horatio's status; and he adds to it himself by the quiet good sense with which he responds to Hamlet's hysterical treatment of him after the Ghost's vanishing.

Thereafter he disappears from the play for the best part of an hour; until Hamlet—and Shake-

THE CHARACTERS

sppeare—need him again, and he is conjured, as if from nowhere, by a simple

What ho! Horatio!

—and the very simplicity of the business somehow suggests that he has been within call all the time. Shakespeare restores him to importance by the as simple means of giving Hamlet, then and there, twenty lines to speak in his praise. The method is nakedly simple but, as it is employed here, dramatically sound. For we have Hamlet's relief and gratitude, as he turns from false friends to this true one,¹ finding spontaneous utterance. And we learn of Horatio what we could hardly—since he has no direct part in the action—learn from him: that he is poor and what the world calls a failure, yet that good and ill fortune alike leave him unmoved (this praise also, save for one gentle protest; he is as little self-regardful as that). For all of which Hamlet loves him and trusts both his judgment and faith. His task now is to stand, silent and apart, keeping, through the acting of *The Murder of Gonzago*, a steadier watch upon the King than Hamlet's can be; and this (seemingly irrelevant) expansion of his character will lend to the still figure, as we watch it, a fresh quality and strength.

But, for self-expression, Shakespeare gives him thrifty measure indeed. Forty-eight words for moral support of Hamlet in this crisis (that is the exact allowance for the play-scene and its sequel); after which he disappears again, to reappear only when Hamlet has gone to Eng'land. And though, watching Ophelia and the first to hear of his friend's

¹ Cf. p. 85.

H A M L E T

return, he is then quite an important figure, he speaks, except for the reading of a letter, exactly twelve lines. Were there no more to say about it, his presenting is a masterpiece of dramatic economy.

From the instant of Hamlet's return, Horatio never leaves his side again, and the faithful watchful presence now becomes as eloquent as any speech. Two perceptive sentences stand out from his encouragement of the anodyne talk with the clown, and when he has heard of the events on the ship he warns Hamlet that the King must soon learn of them too. He is glad to have him distracted by the ridiculous Osric. He sees how the long strain is telling on him, counsels him to forgo the fencing match; since he will not, can only stand apart again in watchful silence to exclaim once when the first blood flows. He helps bar the King's escape. Then, death nearing, Hamlet calls to him.

Till now he has responded to princely professions of affection with a 'vour poor servant' or a 'good my lord'. Now he asserts himself and his love by a fierce eloquence of deed, in which a man that even Hamlet has not known--and by no means the equable philosopher--stands suddenly revealed.¹ But, the moment past, he lets the poisoned cup be wrested from him, and vows himself, silently and for the last time, to his friend's service. We hear that service begun. And the Horatio who will speak

to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about . . .

is a man who has grown in stature under our eyes.

¹ Though there was a passing hint of him in the Horatio who reproved his Prince for these 'wild and whirling words.'

THE CHARACTERS

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are set and sustained in sharp contrast to Horatio; false friends against true. The difference extends to all they are, the three of them. Horatio; poor and unself-seeking, the student, the philosopher, with his loyal respect for the old king:

our valiant Hamlet,
For so this side of our known world esteemed him . . .

-- he had just once seen him living; he journeyed from Wittenberg to stand, a simple looker-on, at his funeral; and after, it was not for him to intrude upon the son's, upon the prince's, grief. And Hamlet's greeting to him as 'good friend' and 'fellow-student' shows him a chosen friend, and of recent days.¹ It is during his absence from the action that 'dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern' come to pervade it. They have been sent for by the King. They, then, are approved of by the new regime; and

being of so young days brought up with him,
And since so neighbour'd to his youth and humour . . .

being, besides (with their supple 'gentry') fitter companions for a prince, will they not be taken even nearer to Hamlet's heart?² He greets them, with much the same impulsive affection, as 'my excellent good friends.' But how different -- even before suspicion has kindled in him --

¹ Shakespeare, in this part of the play, is still thinking of Hamlet as of 'student's age.

² He speaks of them later on as 'schoolfellows,' boyhood friends, therefore; and this Horatio specifically is not.

H A M L E T

the smart chop-logic of the talk from the confident refuge he took in Horatio's understanding! The false relation hardens as he screens himself from their prying by oracular evasions and trivial gossip about the players. He cannot flatly and finally dismiss them; it is a princely penalty to be so 'waited upon,' and to have to repay treachery with courtesy. But their second intrusion on him provokes, as we noted, his summons to that other friend, and the fervent

Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
As e'er my conversation cop'd withal.

And the contrast here will be heightened by the very look of the three; the smiling, point-device courtiers making their college on the one side, the grave, sober-suited, simple-mannered student appearing on the other.

From their summoning of Hamlet to the Queen to the departure with him— their own fatal departure— for England, Shakespeare endows the couple with more and with a somewhat more sinister importance. 'Pretence to good comradeship is over. There is a touch of regret for it in Hamlet's

Why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?

but little more than cant, one fears, in Rosencrantz' plaintive

My lord, you once did love me.

The sprightly schoolfellows, who were 'to draw him on to pleasures,' are now plainly his enemy's instruments; and he soon finds himself no better

THE CHARACTERS

than a captive in their hands. Then their tone, quite appropriately, changes :

What have you done, my lord, with the dead body? . . . Tell us where 'tis, that we may take it thence, and bear it to the chapel. . . . My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go with us to the king.

That he goes into exile practically their prisoner is clear from the fact that—and for the best of reasons!—it is they who carry, not he, the King's sealed commission; he has to burgle their cabin to secure it. But there is no hint that they knew of its contents.

Horatio (as if to complete the pattern of their relation to him) is allowed a grim comment on their fate :

So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to 't.

And Hamlet, hardened to his task by now, callously caps it :

Why, man, they did make love to this employment;
They are not near my conscience, their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow.
'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.

Fit epitaph for them, doubtless; and the fate of the nonentity who yields himself in complacent ignorance to evil employment has its due place in tragedy. And if we feel that they might as well have been let lapse, harmless and unharmed, from the story, it will not be so much in compunction for them as because, dramatically, they seem hardly worth the killing.

As parts to be played, unhappy actors cast for

HAMLET

them will protest that they are among the very worst in all Shakespeare. They must not, of course, be judged by what a producer's blue pencil may leave of them; though, as it happens, they are too closely knit into the action for this to be very trenchantly wielded. But do all that legitimately may be done with them, they will yet remain, one fears, superior puppets; for Shakespeare himself has not given them life. That he could have by a touch or so, and without making too much of them, the comparison with Horatio shows. The deficiency is explicable. He did not, I fancy, to begin with, mean them to be more in themselves than supple, superficial nonentities. They are less even than that; a single nonentity split into two. Again we see why. One false friend to balance the one true friend and to make but one more in the series of deers, Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude—the mere pattern would be monotonous. An occasional trio is a welcome relief from successive duets and solos. Nor could Hamlet come off from a single inquisitor of the sort as he does from the pair, lightly playing one against the other, using them as springboard for his antic disposition. So far they suffice. But the stress of the action sequent to the play-scene is too hard on them dramatically. They are not quite of the right stuff for the treacherous embassy to England, for Hamlet's escort to his death. Shakespeare may be feeling so when he imposes on them those two surprisingly solid speeches—which do not fit them, which only leave them, therefore, looking more puppet-like than before.¹ But at that crisis of the play, with everything in

¹ The point is further discussed on p. 106

THE CHARACTERS

rapid movement, he can spare them no more consideration. They remain, then, two rather lifeless strands in its lively fabric.

POI ONIUS

As if, again, for contrast, two family groups are presented to us: Claudius, Hamlet, Gertrude, united and divided by evil; Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, happy together in their ignorance that this same evil is already working to destroy them. The play exists within a framework of these contrasts of character and situation, as must every play more or less, for it is the stress of them which gives it stability. Here is the second dimension—so to call it—which the dramatic form needs and pure narrative does not. Its scheme need not be made very patent. We should probably be left about as conscious of it as we are of the comparable means by which some fine building is kept erect; we feel secure when we stand in it, but do not forget its beauty because of that. But without these means to stability, building or play, for all their beauty, will alike collapse.

We can, I think, see Shakespeare changing his mind a little about Polonius. In his first scene (not to count the single speech at the Council) he is far from being a 'tedious old fool.' His injunctions to Laertes and Ophelia are clear and terse, and contain sound worldly wisdom. The change comes with the charge to Reynaldo; and hence, perhaps, the seemingly undue length allowed to that minor matter; our first impressions of the character must be corrected. After the resolu-

H A M L E T

tion into the more comic key we have him spontaneously and abundantly himself; though the mere abundance is gradually pruned, for once the garrulity has been demonstrated, the effect of it can be gained without much indulgence in the thing itself.

His adjusted place in the play's character scheme soon becomes plain. Hamlet doubts and delays, questions and suffers. Claudius, all outward candour, keeps his secret close and moves surely to his ends. Polonius is the complacent wiseacre, infatuate in opinion, precipitate in action—and usually wrong. He is not wholly or obviously a fool, nor externally ridiculous at all. He can occupy his high place with dignity enough—only now and then calling pomposity to his aid—so long as everybody else will keep theirs. He is for order and degree, whether he must be telling his own daughter that

Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star,
This must not be. . . .

or simply in using the players

according to their desert.

He is loyal to the powers that be:

Assure you, my good liege,
I hold my duty as I hold my soul,
Both to my God and to my gracious king. . . .

—as he will, with like fervency, once have assured him whom Claudius has doubly succeeded (for clearly he has held his old place); nor is he the man to have been pained by his 'dear majesty' the Queen's 'o'er-hasty marriage.'

He is kindly; his manner to his retainer 'good

THE CHARACTERS

Reynaldo 'is most affable. As a man of the world he will not idealise his fellow-creatures; and at Ophelia's defence of Hamlet—

My lord, he hath importuned me with love
In honourable fashion.

—he scoffs. Yet he is tolerant, as a man of the world must be; and when it appears that he was wrong—and he ungrudgingly admits it—his only comment is a perfunctory

I feared he did but trifle,
And meant to wreck thee . . .

Nor do we gather that he will be gravely displeased if Reynaldo does discover Laertes to have been

drinking, fencing, swearing, quarrelling, drabbing

as long as no great scandal results. For his last sly injunction—something of a come-down from the earlier, sententious 'to thine own self be true'—is a

And let him ply his music.¹

Of the same pattern as this spying upon Laertes is his 'loosing' of Ophelia, decoy-like, to Hamlet, Claudius and he to be the 'lawful espials' here. His intentions are excellent. To cure this madness one must first know its cause, and he suspects nothing sinister in that. He does not stop to consider that it may be somewhat ignoble, a little 'let him put his daughter to such a use. It is as which is quarrelsome, I can hardly believe is meant to disclose a last interest in this aspect of Laertes' education. It is rivalent, surely, of 'Let him go his own way and the enrivenself.' We have a similar, better known saying in 'Julius music.'

H A M L E T

like him that, having baited the trap with her and placed a prayer book in her hands, the sight of her, docile in guile, should prompt the incongruous platitude :

We are oft to blame in this—
'Tis too much proved !—that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself.

and as like him that, when he and Claudius emerge disappointed from their hiding-place, he ignores her distress.

He is old, of course ; and in such shallow natures feelings desiccate with age. He looks back whimsically to when

in my youth I suffered much extremity for love. . . .¹

He does not—if the very slightest of touches is there to tell us so—find even the sight of mimic suffering to his taste ; for, when the player pauses in the tale of Hecuba, comes his :

Look, whether he has not turned his colour and has tears
in 's eyes. Prithee, no more.

and whenever he can so turn his busy mind from statecraft :

he's for a jig or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps.

Poor Polonius ! Were this no other than the world he has so successfully learnt to live in, where words are potent and ambassadors correctly come and go, where one so pleasantly ' hunts . . . ' the

¹ He is definitely one of Shakespeare's ' old ' men, no account being taken of his likelier age as the father of Laertes and, as it concerns the women characters, Ophelia. See p. 282, note ; where the question of this convention is discussed.

THE CHARACTERS

trail of policy,' or may with a 'bait of falsehood'
take a 'carp of truth,' and

of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out. . . .

where human nature must perforce become

As 'twere a thing a little soiled i' the working . . .

but to no worse effect than that a prince may seduce your daughter and your son be debauched in Paris—were life, in sum, simply the sort of clever game he thinks it, he then would be the man he so complacently feels himself to be, the tried and wise 'assistant for a state,' who has never

positively said 'tis so'
When it proved otherwise. . . .

whose never-lacking advice has only to be followed for all to be well! But Shakespeare shows us, by a harsher light, a very different picture; of a silly old gentleman pettily manœuvring among passions and forces that are dark to him. No one wishes him ill. But he will meddle. And at last a sword-thrust, meant for his master, incontinently ends him. For an elegy:

Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger.

And as if to mark his pitiful futility his corpse is let lie there, eavesdropping still, while the revealing quarrel rages between mother and son. Then it is lugged away, like so much carrion.

It is a nicely mischievous touch that at the University he 'did enact'—of all possible parts!
—Julius Cæsar.

HAMLET

LAERTES

In the two earlier scenes before he leaves for Paris, Laertes is a more or less conventional figure. But even here—in his elder-brother moralising, and the import of Ophelia's demure

But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whilst like a puff'd and reckless libertine
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
And recks not his own rede.

and in Polonius' hints to Reynaldo of how he is likely to be found passing his time, and that suggestion of

The flash and outbreak of a fiery mind,
A savageness in unreclaimed blood. . . .

—there is preparation for the contrast to be established later between him and Hamlet, between the pensive idealist and full-blooded confident youth.

When he returns Hamlet, the irresolute bungler, has gone—presumably to his death—leaving disaster behind him; Polonius slain, Ophelia 'driven into desperate terms.' In his place uprises this gallant fellow, carried into the palace upon a wave of rebellion, but, disdainful of such aid, facing the King alone:

To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes; only I'll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father.

What—after so much trimming and veering,

THE CHARACTERS

mining and counter-mining—could be finer?
What more tender too than his grief?

O rose of May,
Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!

And when—the true culprit known and reported
to be again within his reach—he is ready straight-
way

To cut his throat i' the church.

even that makes pleasant contrast with Hamlet's late refusal to kill the praying Claudius lest he should spare him hell fire. Yet the next moment this 'very noble youth' is bettering an already scoundrelly plan to assure him his revenge with a secretly sharpened sword by proposing to poison it too. Conventional virtue strangely belied; our edifying young counsellor of the earlier scene with his sister turned the wrong side out indeed! •

Shakespeare may not have had the anomaly in mind from the beginning; it suffices him to have a character here in hand that is capable of it. His purpose, at its crudest, is to swing our sympathy back to Hamlet, Laertes losing on the balance; but he will enrich his character-scheme in doing so.¹ It looks very much as if—lest, misled by his self-depreciation, we misinterpret Hamlet's failings—he now wished to show us what moral instability may really be, and to what sort of nature it

¹ In Q1 it is Claudius who proposes to poison the sword; Laertes merely acquiesces. Whether this shows us Shakespeare's first intention or is (as current theory about Q1 requires, if it is to be consistently applied; but need it be?) a part of the pirate's bungling, the improvement in the true text is plain.

H A M L E T

properly belongs. *Morally* unstable Hamlet is not.
His

thinking too precisely on the event. . . .

may sap his resolution, but it sharpens, not blunts, his sense of right and wrong. Laertes—swayed by every passion and rash in action; suspicious, as all unreasoning people are, but the more blind to flattery—proves wax in the clever fingers of the King. He is too ignorant of himself to be, by that banal precept, true to himself, and he can be cajoled and provoked into the ignoblest crime.

The man of action, with his

O, thou vile king,
Give me my father. . . .
How came he dead? I'll not be juggled with. . . .

is soon manœuvred to an intellectual standstill; and, when grief for his sister has also worked on him, he becomes the easiest of dupes. Claudius, finding use for him, first flatters him with confidences and—deadlier than plain praise—by reporting others' praise of him; then so stings him with doubts of the worth of his passion and grief that the moment-old honest welcome of the news of Hamlet's return—

But let him come;
It warms the very sickness in my heart
That I shall live, and tell him to his teeth,
'Thus diddest thou.'

—is replaced, not simply by consent to an underhand trick, which would itself normally be abhorrent to him, but—for defiant answer to these taunting doubts—by that

I will do 't;
And for that purpose I'll anoint my sword. . . .

THE CHARACTERS

I'll touch my point
With this contagion, that, if I gall him slightly,
It may be death.¹

Lured into one infamy, from pure bravado he must outpass it with another.

Committed to such partnership, he is in a trap, from which, till it is too late, he will not have the moral courage to escape. Yet he is no murderer at heart; and, when he follows Ophelia to her grave, while Hamlet's

That is Laertes, a very noble youth. . . .
may echo a little ironically in our ears, since we know what is brewing, the one-time truth of it is mirrored, and is meant to be, in his anguish, in the tender

Lay her i' the earth,
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring!

—even in his flashing attack, with a

The devil take thy soul!

upon his outrageous rival in mourning, whose 'wicked deed' it truly is that has wrought the ill.

He and his enemy pulled apart, he has to stand and listen to strange things; to that

I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum. . . .

¹ Claudius, it is worth noting, has no great confidence either in the young man's self-control—how should he have!—or powers of deception. Laertes is to keep close within his chamber until the moment of the fencing match. And he is warned:

If this should fail,
And that our drift look through our bad performance,
'Twere better not assayed. . . .

H A M L E T

—no vulgar seducer's cry ; to the still stranger

Hear you, Sir,
What is the reason that you use me thus?
I loved you ever. . . .

And he is not the man to unriddle them. But when he is reminded of what his very effective answer is to be by the King's privy

Strengthen your patience in our last night's speech.

he does not respond to that either ; he goes glumly away.

It is again hard listening for him when, all being ready for the treacherous match, Hamlet, before King and Court, craves his pardon for the wrong done :

Give me your pardon, sir I've done you wrong,
But pardon 't as you are a gentleman . . .
Sir, in this audience,
Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts
That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house
And hurt my brother.

—and to this he must reply. A glance exchanged with the King will tell us by whose help he has concocted the quibbling

I am satisfied in nature,
Whose motive, in this case, should stir me most
To my revenge : but in my terms of honour . . .

(honour!) which hardens, as before, to the bravado of

But till that time
I do receive your offered love like love,
And will not wrong it.

We need not be surprised that he fences ill. He is at odds with himself even as Hamlet was

THE CHARACTERS

And since he cannot fairly come near his man with the poisoned blade, his stroke itself must be treacherous--which featherweight addition to his guilt goes, he finds, 'almost' against his conscience; a flashlight upon his moral disorder. But, indeed, into such a tangle of wickedness has he got himself that, when the tables are suddenly turned on him, what we hear in his

Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric,
I am justly killed with mine own treachery.

is something like thankfulness. He pays his penalty. He sees to it that Claudius does not escape. Hamlet forgives him, and we are meant to, also.

OPHELIA

But while Laertes deserves his fate, and Polonius invites his by his meddling, of what is Ophelia guilty? At worst, of a single lie told to a madman for his good. We may call her docility a fault, when, as she is bid, she shuts herself away from Hamlet; but how not trust to her brother's care for her and her father's wisdom? How even question the part she is made to play later when not her father only but the King and Queen themselves prepare her for it?

She is no fool. Shakespeare shows us that to begin with by the touch of mischievous humour with which she counters Laertes' homily. And beneath the dutifully diffident

I do not know, my lord, what I should think.

her feeling is clear that Hamlet's love for her is wholly honourable. As to which she is right. But she must obey her father.

H A M L E T

‘Many a day’—whatever that may mean in the calendar of frustrate love—passes before the two meet again. She has been sending back his letters and refusing to see him; till, one day as she sits sewing in her closet, he suddenly breaks in upon her, dumbly distraught, suffering, mad.

Mad for thy love!

My lord, I do not know;

But truly I do fear it

By parting her from him, then, they have brought this guilt upon her. And next they must needs thrust her in his path again, so that, since her ‘good beauties’ did the harm, her virtues the kindly Queen hopes—may somehow

bring him to his wonted way again

When Hamlet discovers and speaks to her she naturally says nothing of their last strange meeting. One does not remind a madman of his madness; though, indeed, he seems sane enough now. She offers—as any girl would—to set the seal on their parting by giving him back the presents he gave her, the verses he wrote her; ‘ill at these numbers’ though he said he was, they were music to her. If he will not take them back things may then begin to mend between them. So simple are her tactics. He does refuse them; but it is with a harsh, unexpected

No, not I

I never gave you aught

which is like a blow in the face to her, an unkindness far outpassing her obedient repelling of his letters since, and refusals to see him. For it is a denial that he ever did love her—the estranged lover’s cruellest revenge.

THE CHARACTERS

Why does she not tell him that she only obeyed her father in shutting herself away from him? At the mere thought that he never loved her she would have no heart to. She puts the little packet of his gifts down somewhere; let happen to it what will. He rouses her pride, too, by his sudden sardonic

Ha, ha! are you honest . . . Are you fair?

And if there is a certain self-consciousness in the dignity of her

What means your lordship?

are not those eavesdroppers chiefly to blame? Once more, and perforce, she is obeying her father; but—though surely they all only mean him well—it is to more questionable purpose now.

Hamlet has his secret from her too. Stung by her seeming fickleness he may have been, but that was not the death of his love for her. He cannot tell her of his mother's guilt; nor is there any but this riddling way of telling her what it has meant to him, of his lost faith not simply in womanhood, but in himself where womanhood is concerned:

I did love you once. . . . You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it; I loved you not.

So her father was right when he scoffed at her tale of her wooing 'in honourable fashion.' She accepts disillusionment with a miserable

I was the more deceived.

What with this and with what follows, his bitter

Get thee to a nunnery; why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? . . .

H A M L E T

she might well by now be forgetting the eavesdroppers and her task here. She is sharply reminded of them by the abrupt, inconsequent, fiercely suspicious

Where's your father?

What on the instant should she answer? He is 'mad,' and there is danger in his looks. She tells her loyally defensive lie:

At home, my lord.

He knows, as he puts the question, that Polonius is hiding there; he does not positively know that she knows it and is lying to him, nor greatly care to know. It is enough that she is a part of the conspiracy of evil around him, and, in her very womanhood, of the 'wantonness and ignorance,' the lusts of the flesh, in which the evil first took root.

Go to, I'll no more on 't, it hath made me mad. . . .

For her, the well-meant appeasing lie has merely set a match to his madness, which now rages over her meaninglessly. Does *she* paint, jig, amble, lisp? She prays aloud for him. And her thought, when he has left her, is of the 'noble mind . . . overthrown,' only later of her 'deject and wretched' self. She stays silent and scarce-regarded while the King and her father, emerging from their hiding and having had their use of her, discuss weightier matters. But behind that strained mask of grief her own sanity is already wavering. When they have gone she goes quietly away.¹

¹ For a discussion of the contradictory stage directions, see p. 81, note.

One can detect in Hamlet here a slight psychological incongruity, for which the old story or the old play may be

THE CHARACTERS

Nor will the strain be less when, but a few minutes later, we see her coming with the rest to

responsible, the episode in it which gives us the 'fair woman' sent to seduce him and his secret from him. There is nothing in the least wanton about Ophelia; yet (well before, in his mad rage, his obsession about his mother's wantonness shows) his talk to her of beauty transforming honesty to a bawd sounds a little as if he suspected her of such designs on him. There is effective irony, of course, in his speaking thus to an innocent girl, who has been 'loosed' to him with a prayer-book in her hand; and the subtler thought—that it is even viler to turn innocence and piety to such uses—is already implicit in Polonius' preparatory

We are oft to blame in this,
 . . . that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself.

Yet it looks as if the genesis of Hamlet's attitude lay in a recollection of the cruder theme. This would fit in, what is more, with the surprisingly indecent treatment of her in the play-scene—since nothing she has said or done gives excuse for that. But again, there is more refined cruelty and more disequilibrium of mind in saying such things to an innocent girl. Have we here then, perhaps, a visible part of the process of Shakespeare's transference of the story from the physical to the psychological plane?

To the generally gentler view of Hamlet—a little out of fashion now—belongs the penetrating remark by Lamb in his essay *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare*. ' . . . in all such deep affections as had subsisted between Hamlet and Ophelia there is a stock of *supererogatory love* (I may venture to use the expression) which in any great grief of heart, especially where that which preys upon the mind cannot be communicated, confers a kind of indulgence upon the grieved party to express itself, even to its heart's dearest object, in the language of a temporary alienation . . . ' Lamb was in justified reaction against the ranting bullying Hamlets he too often saw. He touches, needless to say, the heart of the matter, and he must himself have looked often upon its yet more tragic aspects. But 'language of a temporary alienation' is a fairly mild term for what Hamlet does say.

HAMLET

the performance of the promised play. She has been trained to Court life, and to be merry when merriment is in demand. And here is Hamlet, gaiety itself, no trace of his lunatic passion left on him, joking with the King and her father. And they, seemingly, are as gay as he, and might quite have forgotten their late resolve to send him to banishment or prison. But at least he will have no more to say to her. Far from it; he turns upon her again. She suffers ignorantly, and there is no more pitiful suffering. She is sensible of obscure forces at work around her. She knows now that it is no wrecked love for her insignificant self which has sent him mad. The thing has other roots, and promises—what dreadful harvest? Yet she had to be given by the father she trusts to be scourged by the man she loves; and now she has smilingly to face more unmeet cruelty still. His raging still in her ears, she finds him nearing her again; and, for a sequel to it—sequel besides to that now recanted wooing ‘in honourable fashion,’ those ‘holy vows’!—he sets himself to cheapen her before all the Court by squatting familiarly at her feet and launching smutty jokes at her.¹

She defends herself as best she may, tagging to her distressed interjections a formal ‘my lord’ for some denial of the lewd intimacy—its implications so plain to the smirking courtiers!—thus

¹ It is not that a little loose talk at a Renaissance Court would be anything very out of the way. But this particular passage of equivoque is, to begin with, exceedingly gross; and, as inflicted by Hamlet, the bookish, fine-minded student, upon the strictly schooled, well-guarded, mere girl that Ophelia is, the effect is exceptionally shocking.

THE CHARACTERS

thrust on her. Later she musters courage to make a little casual conversation herself, even to respond to her Prince, as a Court lady should, with a pretence at his own merry mood. But we shall not have forgotten our recent sight of her desperately praying for him, convulsively weeping for her loss of him; and, for all that she keeps up appearances so bravely, we may wonder, as we look at her now, if the gentle, fragile nature could sustain many more such wrenchings at the root.

She vanishes with the rest when the crisis comes, and we do not see her again. For the mindless wraith that we see is no longer Ophelia. The father she loved and trusted killed by the man she loved; it is the final and fatal wrench. Her madness tragically out-matches his whose work it is.

CLAUDIUS

We have in Claudius the makings of the central figure of a tragedy. Something of him will be found very highly developed in Macbeth. There again is the man who does murder for his crown, cannot repent, and is drawn ever further into ill.¹ But here Hamlet himself is allowed so to sway the action of the play that no other character

¹ And is there not in

If 'twere done when 'tis done then 'twere well
It were done quickly. . . .

a distinct echo of Claudius' lines to Laertes:

. . . That we would do
We should do when we would; for his 'would' changes,
And hath abatements and delays as many
As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents. . . .

H A M L E T

can be very freely treated if the framework of the accepted story is to be maintained. Claudius in particular, the 'incestuous, adulterate beast' of its beginning, must remain the 'incestuous, murderous, damned Dane' at the end, whatever may be done with him in between.

It is long before Shakespeare lets us see him as he is. We encounter him first, before the Ghost has spoken, presiding at his Council, the Queen at his side, speaking of his brother's death with dignified sorrow; discreetly implying as to his marriage—in the

our some time sister, now our queen,
The imperial jointress of this warlike state. . . .

—that it is chiefly a dynastic business; benevolent to Laertes; gentle but firm with the recalcitrant Hamlet. His kindness is a little too feline, perhaps, his discourse somewhat over-elaborate, his courtesy too uniform to be quite unfeigned; and his protests of fatherly love for the young man, whose succession—with whatever legal warrant—he has forestalled, may slightly smack of hypocrisy. But these are harsh criticisms. He is new to his throne, and naturally anxious, under the particular circumstances, to stand well with everyone around him. And even Hamlet, left alone, his mind only on the marriage, does not hold Claudius so heavily to blame for it. The shame is his mother's.

So far, then, there does not seem to be much against him; and superficially—seeing him with his courtiers' eyes—there is much in his favour. And when, the Ghost's tale told, we see him again, we look in vain for confirmation of it. Everything he does and says is far more consistent with

THE CHARACTERS

innocence than guilt. The very point, in fact, of that

O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!
My tables - meet it is I set it down
That one may smile and smile and be a villain . . .

has been that, to look at Claudius, the thing is incredible. Picture him thus, an urbane, considerate and convivial gentleman, going quietly and confidently about the business of his Court and State, and we understand why Hamlet, in a calmer moment, may feel that it is perhaps 'a damned ghost' that he has seen, and that his

imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's stutty

Claudius is, then, a consummate hypocrite. But everything till now has gone so smoothly for him that he may well think himself secure. Shakespeare, as it happens, has small choice, in the early part of the play, but to present him to us thus, the mask fitting marvellously, unless he is to be given some counterpart to Horatio for a confidant, or indulged, he also, in soliloquy. The technical constraint is turned to advantage. To have a Hamlet and a Claudius matched in method would be to the prejudice of each. Instead, since we for long never see Claudius alone, not except among those whom it is his business to deceive—there can be most effectively set against Hamlet's hesitations, doubts and nervous introspection, this easy, equable assurance. We do see him gradually drawn into ever graver consideration of Hamlet's case, to the point of resolving to dispatch him to England. But even this is no certain evidence of his guilt. While it may at

HAMLET

one time be wise to keep a disinherited heir at your Court and under your eye, it may become wiser to send him packing upon some mission abroad. He goes to the entertainment Hamlet has provided apparently in the gayest of moods; and if he lapses into silence—why, even as things are on the surface, he has enough to trouble him. His incontinent flight from its cardinal provocation finally convinces Hamlet of his guilt. But not till even later, till, for the very first time in the play, he is left alone, does he himself definitely confirm it to us, with the

Oh, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,
A brother's murder.

That at least, I am persuaded, is how Shakespeare planned the matter, and I venture to wish he had left it at that. The earlier, revealing aside, spoken while Polonius, with his talk of pious action sugaring o'er the devil himself, arms Ophelia with her prayer-book for the ambush—that

Oh, 'tis too true!
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
'Than is my deed to my most painted word
O heavy burden!

—has all the look of a subsequently applied patch. It is somewhat flat in itself, and so awkwardly placed, that it can be given no great dramatic force.¹ It is a feeble anticipation of the very

¹ Not because it is an aside. Claudius could, indeed, so far isolate himself upon the outer stage as to give it the effect of a soliloquy. But it is irrelevant to the rest of the scene; nothing legitimately leads up to it or away from it.

THE CHARACTERS

effective, long pent outbreak of the soliloquy. What justifies it?

Does Shakespeare want to show us Claudius' conscience at work before risk of discovery rouses it? That may be. Is it that he will not keep us waiting longer for a definite admission of guilt? The dramatic effect so far has not lain, of course, in our doubts of this. We shall have taken the Ghost's word without question. It is Hamlet's own doubting which has been so effectively excused by the sustained appearance of innocence. An audience nowadays not only knows the story of the play, but is insensitive to some of its original significance; and actors have come to suit their reading of the parts to this. The Elizabethan Hamlet had, with his audience, reason enough for doubting whether it was, after all, 'an honest ghost' he had seen.¹ His modern successors mostly seem to hold the Ghost's word for gospel and reproach themselves for even momentary disbelief. And a modern Claudius, his reputation for all but villainy long lost, plays the villain from the start. If this anticipatory aside is a patch, it may well have been put on to save the Elizabethan Claudius from appearing on the contrary, too persistently innocent, and for fear the audience should rather come to share Hamlet's doubt than, as they were meant to, detachedly observe him. It must now be accepted, of course, as an integral part of the text; it should equally be a direction to the actor to make—except for this single moment—the 'plastering art' of his 'most painted word' as convincing as possible.

The 'prayer-scene'—but, try as he will, the

¹ Cf. (once more) Dover Wilson's convincing argument.

H A M L E T

guilty wretch cannot pray—is a turning point in the presenting of Claudius, as in the action of the whole play. Till now the smiling mask, the mellifluously conventional speech, clouded and frayed but a little even by this alarming business of the play; here, in sharp contrast, the seething mind laid bare. And though the mask goes on again, it will hereafter be transparent to us.

This hard argument about the efficacy of prayer must have been the matter of more than one sermon heard both by Shakespeare and his audience in those compulsorily theological days—by Claudius from his Court chaplain too. We have, therefore, no simple sinner, with confessor at hand to direct him, if he would, towards penance and absolution, but a man dosed with controversial doctrine, who must struggle with its dilemmas as best he can. From his guilty heart he cannot pray. Yet God's mercy is for the guilty too, and his fault is past. 'But its fruits are his still, and

May one be pardoned and retain the offence'

In this world perhaps; yet

'tis not so above

What then? what rests?

Try what repentance can, what can it not?

Yet what can it when one can not repent?

After which, and with some more beating of the breast, argument collapses into

Help, angels! make assay.

Bow, stubborn knees, and, heart with strings of steel

Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe. . . .

and a weary

All may be well.

THE CHARACTERS

While he is trying what the older submissive routine will do for him Hamlet passes and pauses ; and we are shown to what twists of savage theology a finer spirit in its perplexity may be wrought. His sword is out, his enemy helpless. But will it be revenge enough

To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?
No . . .

- not death only but damnation must be assured. So Hamlet passes on. And by this perverted scruple he opens the way to all the ills to come ; quickly beginning with Polonius' death, Ophelia's to follow, the Queen's, Laertes, and his own little delayed. Had he known the truth—which we learn on his departure, from Claudius' defeated

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below ;
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

that his enemy was *not* purging his soul, but (so we shall gather later on) planning how to save his skin by ridding himself of son as well as father, he might have done straightforward human justice on him. Instead, the adversaries issue from the frustrate encounter—Claudius unaware of Hamlet's presence, Hamlet as blind to what that bowed head hides—these strangely warped religious exercises, the one to worse frustration, the other to dispute for his soul's salvation no more.

This revelation of an inward Claudius does more than rescue the character from conventional villainy. Here is a man who can face the truth, not only about his deed and its deserts, but about himself too. His own chaplain could not argue

HAMLET

the question better, nor—one may add—to a more orthodox conclusion. But he rises from his knees knowing himself to be as hardened in sin as ever, and so proceeds, with only the more clarity of mind, to give effect to those thoughts which have obstinately remained below. He is in danger, he must act; and it is small wonder that such a weathercock as Hamlet, veering in spiritual storm, should have, for the time, no chance against him.

Quite naturally, while he is the motive power of the action (as he is from now to near the end of the play) he is more vividly revealed; though the fact may be that only from about now did Shakespeare start developing the borrowed character. But graft and stock are, as usual, made to agree. If the formal, calculated speech belonged to theatrical convention, it also fitted dramatically both the King discoursing and the man of guilty conscience, fearful lest an unguarded word betray him (and the more fearful that, no one suspecting him, he is the bolder to relax his guard). But things, though worse, are now better for him. If Hamlet, by some queer clairvoyance, has happened, as it seems, upon his secret, he has also given him good excuse—and is to make it better by killing Polonius—to deal drastically with such madness. It is the true part of a grieved stepfather and prudent statesman, for the sake of his country's peace, for the culprit's own sake, to get him quickly and quietly out of the way. He subscribes to the madness: for who will believe what a madman may say? Yet once in England the dispossessed heir might turn menacingly sane. There is safety only in his death; so that is duly planned. And as he cannot—let it cost him his

THE CHARACTERS

soul—repent the one murder he is the readier to profit by another.¹

But once that reproachful figure no longer paces his lobbies, he can—being the clear-thinking, practical man he is—banish both the old crime and the new from his mind. And here is the key to the Claudius that we see for a short while, grieving genuinely enough for Polonius' death, over Ophelia's suffering, and facing Laertes with unforced dignity and calm. No merely well-masked villain; but the man that he would be, could his crimes but be left out of account; the man that he likes to be able to feel that he is. And of such is the real and dangerous wickedness of the world! It is this interim picture of him, with its touches of inconsistency, which does most to make Claudius a figure of flesh and blood.

He never relapses after to theatrical convention. And note how by this the writing of the part has changed. For the formal line and sentence we have sensitive, pregnant phrases, which seem to shape themselves spontaneously into verse. We can see his mind at work; and with what agility when, his security shattered by the sudden tidings of the failure of his plot against Hamlet, the awakened devil in him turns on the instant to make Laertes his accomplice in another¹

It is masterly diplomacy by which he converts the young man's demand for open justice on his father's murderer into consent to the seemingly friendly fencing match. But if the task were a simple one neither of the two would appear to be

¹ Though now it is ever to be explained away, Claudius seemingly does not stop to think. But Shakespeare knows that this chicken will not come home to roost.

H A M L E T

such dangerous adversaries to Hamlet as, for this last round of the fight, they must. The biter is bit, however. The fascination of poison—when Laertes so unexpectedly proposes to ‘anoint’ the unbuttoned sword—once more proves too much for him. And he also will be ‘hoist with his own petar.’

Shakespeare finds no occasion to develop him further; he lets him slip back, rather, into the mere machinery of the story. But just so men do, after a period of amnesty, relapse to a routine of guilt. We note his callous silence upon the news of Ophelia’s death; his chief care now is to keep Laertes under his eye, under his spell. In the last scene the old smiling mask is on again, the speech is as mellifluous as before. But this is dramatically right, Hamlet has returned, and there is fresh guilt to hide. A last blot is added to his swiftly-closing account, when he lets the instant pass on which Gertrude could be saved. And, dosed with his own poison, he meets a fittingly ignominious end.

Claudius does not come quite unquestionably to life. The material for the character is there, old and new, and it is all consistent enough. But Shakespeare has left some of it incompletely developed, some indeed to implication only, and the actor must use judgment in assembling it. And though Claudius is the villain of the piece, his guilt undoubted and of the blackest, the evidence for the prosecution must be weighed. But an actor will instinctively make himself Counsel for the Defence of the part he plays, when he can.

There is the question of his love for Gertrude, and hers for him. They never themselves refer to

THE CHARACTERS

its illicitly passionate days. There are, indeed, no love passages between them. They are only twice, and for the space of a few lines, left alone together, and then trouble is heavy on them. It has, at this time, even begun to separate them; for Gertrude tells him no more than she need of what has passed with Hamlet in her closet. But throughout the play, alone with her, or before the Court, Claudius shows her very much that loving respect which Hamlet says his father showed her. The relation, as it now is, seems not to lack dignity; and the actor may justifiably somewhat discount the 'Hyperion to a satyr,' and, still more, 'the bloat king,' and the paddock, bat and gib of the closet-scene as the language of angry grief, the pent-up poison of a sick mind. Even the Ghost qualifies his

that incestuous, that adulterate beast . . .

and the 'shameful lust' by

With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts --
O, wicked wit and gifts that have the power
So to seduce . . .

—which suggests, surely, good gifts turned to ill account, and a Gertrude fascinated by them, yet not too easily won.¹ We certainly are not meant to see her enamoured of an obvious monster.

How far was it love for her which tempted him to crime? To this we have his own clear-headed

¹ It is true that a line or so later, the Ghost refers to him as
a wretch, whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine . . .

and even talks of the difference between a 'radiant angel' and 'garbage.' But of all the evidence for the prosecution this is the most—and the most excusably—biased.

H A M L E T

answer when he is wrestling with himself alone and speaks of

those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, my own ambition and my queen. . . .

She takes neither pride of place in it, nor comes as an afterthought. But it is in his converse with Laertes (when, as we have noted, Shakespeare brings him most spontaneously to life) that his feelings for her show. Is it odd that he should so confess himself to the young man?

for myself—

My virtue or my plague, be it either which—
She's so conjunctive to my life and soul,
That as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her.

It sounds, does it not, as if wrung from him? Later comes the rueful (and equally odd, as part of the provocation to the murdering of Hamlet):

Not that I think you did not love your father;
But that I know love is began by time,
And that I see, in passages of proof,
Time qualifies the spark and fire of it.
There lives within the very flame of love
A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it . . .

Of what does that covertly speak---those 'passages of proof'---but of Gertrude's mute obedience to Hamlet's behest to deny herself to his bed? He does not know the reason; she could not tell him. To him it only seems the inevitable sad satiety of a passion such as theirs, grown 'to a plurisy,' dead 'in his own too much.'¹

¹ In letting any matter of this kind pass unemphasised into the play, Shakespeare would be unconcerned with what we may call its likelihood in time; he would not, that is to say---indeed, he does not otherwise---stop to consider whether the closet-scene had taken place a day or so or a week or so earlier.

THE CHARACTERS

Not that this can be very clearly brought home to the audience. Had Shakespeare given himself a freer hand with Claudius and Gertrude, nor let the play be so overwhelmingly dominated by Hamlet, he would, we may well suppose, have clinched this and other questions about them more effectively. As it is, the chief dramatic value of the passages is (yet once more) as a direction to the actors. If Gertrude, from the closet-scene onwards, does a little self-consciously hold aloof from him (except when, for a moment, he is in danger from Laertes), and if he shows himself sombrely aware of it, the lines, when they come to be spoken, will take colour from this. And such an attitude one to the other will in itself be eloquent; especially by contrast to the earlier happiness, shown plainly to the world when at last it may be. But it is a pity that these ends of character are left loose.

Is Claudius a drunkard? We have the promise of the 'jocund healths' he means to drink, and Hamlet's scornful

The king doth wake to night, and takes his rouse,
Keeps wassail, and the wagging upspring reels .

with its sequent

'This heavy-headed revel east and west
Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations,
They clepe us drunkards . . .

But we hear no more of this, except when Hamlet would rather kill his enemy 'drunk asleep' than at his prayers - which is still only evidence for the prosecution - and we see nothing of it at all. So Shakespeare does not want to stress it. But it helps picture a Court in which the student-

H A M L E T

philosopher Hamlet would, at best, feel very out of place; and it gives a significant touch to the picture of the King, no more a drunkard than his neighbour, or than a clever man can afford to be, but the consummate sensualist in this too. And he would find, it might well be, comforting forgetfulness in the nightly wassail, and courage in the 'swaggering upspring and the bravado of those trumpets and drums.¹

GERTRUDE

However else Shakespeare may have envisaged Gertrude upon his stage, it could not have been as the mature matron, the realistic mother of a man of thirty, to which a later-born tradition has unluckily accustomed us. His boys could play the young Ophelia and the fourteen-year-old Juliet and scarcely call convention into question; and one sees them bringing a certain advantageously sexless distinction to the withered Queen Margaret or the stern Volumnia.² But the presenting of

¹ But I saw once an Italian actor who had evidently been greatly struck by this aspect of the character, for his nose was reddened and he played the part bibulously throughout. This lightened the play very much. And here, my dear Dover Wilson, is another possible answer to the burning question: Did Claudius see the Dumb Show? My Italian, at that juncture, was far too muzzy and hilarious to have seen any offence—or, indeed, any meaning at all in it.

² As to the comic old women, it is likely that they were played by men. Dr. W. J. Lawrence thinks so (and allows me to quote him), pointing out that when, with the Restoration, actresses inherited the Juliets and Rosalinds—though even this change was not suddenly complete—such parts as the Nurse in Otway's *Caius Marius* (his adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*) were till the end of the century, or near

THE CHARACTERS

ripe womanhood and its charm would obviously be beyond them. As far, then, as appearance went (and setting aside the simply comic) he had to choose between spontaneous youth and conventional 'age.' Juliet is young. It is against all likelihood that Lady Capulet should be old; but she is made so, for here is an effective contrast which nothing in the story forbids. Ophelia is young; and if likelihood were all, Gertrude, who will certainly never see forty-five again, might better be 'old.' But that would make her relations with Claudius—and *their* likelihood is vital to the play—quite incredible. Therefore she must still be young, only as much older than Ophelia as

it, acted by men. And this, as he justly says, looks very like a survival of Elizabethan practice.

But that, with Shakespeare at any rate, the men did not trespass into this territory beyond the Mistress Overdones and Dame Quicklys and Angelicas is suggested, I think, by the severe limitation of the number of the women's parts. In no play do we find more than five. And this looks like consideration for the likely number of trained apprentices available, a number limited both by law and custom. In *Richard III*, it is true, there are, besides the women's parts, the young King, the Duke of York and Clarence's son to be cast. But for two of these not much skill is needed, and something may be done by doubling. The doubling would be without regard to sex; in *Romeo and Juliet* Lady Montague's death implies the need for a Bal'hasar or a page for Paris. Such plays as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* ask, of course, for a number of children. But they were originally intended, it is presumed, for private performance, and any public theatre would need outside help for their production. Shakespeare, from first to last, is as sparing as possible of women characters, and particularly of the elderly or middle-aged. A heroine he must have, and she perhaps a companion or an attendant or two. For the rest; while fathers and uncles abound, mothers are fairly scarce. And is there an aunt in the canon?

H A M L E T

dress and conduct can suggest. But Shakespeare, by an adroit twist, converts necessity here to profit. He gives us in Gertrude the woman who does not mature, who clings to her youth and all that belongs to it, whose charm will not change but at last fade and wither; a pretty creature, as we see her, desperately refusing to grow old. And it is actually in this pathetic incongruity that the whole tragedy has struck root.

She is drawn for us with unemphatic strokes, and she has but a passive part in the play's action. She moves throughout in Claudius' shadow; he holds her as he has won her, by the witchcraft of his wit. We first see her, sitting in Council at his side, formally presented too, as 'the imperial jointress' of his power. But it is plain that she does little except echo his wishes; sometimes— as in the welcome to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern— she repeats his very words, inverting, as with a slight effort, their order. We practically never see her apart from him, except when, at his and Polonius' urging, she has sent for Hamlet to her closet; and then he follows to bid her 'translate' what has passed. She does not tell him everything. Polonius' death is news enough; the rest, after all, was madness. But here, we may gather, starts a rift between them; from now on they stay conjugally apart, and he feels he has lost her. Later, during the fencing match, when she has momentarily at least recovered her good spirits, in pretty defiance she disobeys him and drinks from the cup he has prepared for her son. That trifling disobedience is her death.

She seems to be fond of Hamlet; though whether she really so much wishes him to stay at

THE CHARACTERS

Court we can hardly tell, for it is under Claudius' eye and influence that she makes the plea. She is gracious to Ophelia; and if the girl's 'good beauties' do turn out to be the 'happy cause' of her son's 'wildness'—why, their marriage would be just what she feels a marriage should be.

For long she does not admit that Hamlet is positively mad—she never uses the word about him until, in her closet, he sees the thing she cannot see. She knows him well enough to know that her own 'o'er-hasty marriage' is at the root of his trouble, but her trivial

Did you assay him
To any pastime?

--when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bring their first report of him—shows her quite insensible to the depth of it.

Yet, watching her, we know that this shallow, amiable, lymphatic creature was an adulteress, cunning enough to deceive her husband. Hamlet says that

she would hang on him
As it increase f appetite had grown
By what it fed on . . .

It was the obvious way of deceiving him. She wept bitterly when he died. We need not, however, see hypocrisy there. She may well have wept the more bitterly because she had been false to him. And husbands, whose love is of too complacent and Hyperion-like a 'dignity,' are temptingly easy to deceive. Within a month she has married her lover, and she is still the Queen. She owns that—in the eyes of the world—it was

H A M L E T

over-hasty of them. But of any remorse for the past there is no hint at all. Surely everything—if her morose son would but come to his senses and take a cheerfuller view of life—has at last turned out very well.

It is upon such a nature, then, that the cathartic storm of Hamlet's stored resentment—the occasion given him—is to break. He has been expressly warned to

leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her.

But her seeming bland immunity from anything of the sort so pricks and stings his own incorrigible moral sense that at last he can restrain himself no more; he must set her up a glass wherein she may see, not the still pretty sight she is used to finding there, the mask of virtue she presents to the world, but the 'inmost part' of her, the terrible truth.

He is coming to her, so she supposes, to be rated for his 'pranks,' which have indeed become 'too broad to bear with,' when he can, under cover of his play, insult before the whole Court both her and his sovereign and step-father by gibing at their marriage. And she has primed herself—clearly she does not relish the task; the subject is a ticklish one; it is Claudius, she announces, who is offended—to be 'round with him.' But his lunatic violence terrifies her, his killing of Polonius breaks her nerve. Within a little he has her cowed. The tables are turned, and he is rating her, scourging her towards repentance for deadly sin.

We have had Claudius a few moments since, facing the evil in him honestly enough; but for a while it seems as if she really did not know what

THE CHARACTERS

Hamlet meant. Still, bewildered though she may be by the rhetoric and moral fervour, his

makes marriage vows
As false as dicers' oaths. . . .

(for answer to the bravado of her 'what have I done. . . .') tells her plainly that he knows of her adultery. But it is past and respectably atoned for, and there is genuine perplexity in her

Ay me! what act,
That roars so loud and thunders in the index?

What *can* she have done to warrant such tremendous execration?

He sets to work, with a kind of painstaking wrath, to demonstrate to her, as to a reprobate child, her moral obliquity. And now it is, her silence tells us, that she will not understand. Very naturally—this from her own son!—she will not. So he coarsens and coarsens his attack, till, finding it intolerable, she pleads guilty. And then he will not spare her. If the carnal sin is all she can recognise, she shall have that painted in its true colours too:

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweet odour of an enscarned bed, . . .

She has ample excuse at last for her pitifully reiterated

O! speak to me no more . . .
No more, sweet Hamlet!

When the Ghost appears—and she is spared the yet deadlier blow of a revelation of the murder—she is blind to its presence, deaf to the voice:

Do you see nothing there?
Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.
Nor did you nothing hear?
No, nothing but ourselves.

HAMLET

and it implies, we feel, a blindness of soul in her besides, a sanity which Hamlet's 'madness' puts to shame. He has battered her into admission of her fleshly sin; but spiritual perception—what can give her that? The division between mother and son is here at its deepest, in this picture of mother, father and son, united but divided, together, but in understanding curelessly apart. And here is intrinsic tragedy, the tragedy of what human beings are; and the action is stayed while we absorb the sense of it. Yet in kindliness the two are never nearer to each other. The ghostly presence—itself so softened—is a reproach to his anger, and her very incomprehension makes her tenderer to him.

The mystic moment past, his compassion, truly, is as bitter as his wrath. To him bitterer; for he has no faith, he finds, in her repentance. Let her assume the virtue she has not. Having stripped one mask from her he bids her wear another; the pretence may become reality in time. He turns bitterer still. She will betray her son to her paramour. What else should she do? He ranks her with his traitor schoolfellows, whom he will trust as he would 'adders fanged.'

But in all this he is wrong. She is repentant and she does not betray him. He is no more just to her than we need expect the one-time chaste, romantic adorer of Ophelia, turned misogynist, to be. For truer insight there is the Ghost's

O! step between her and her fighting soul. . . .

—knowledge, befitting the dead, that even un-
 awares something within her is struggling for sal-

THE CHARACTERS

this, under one guise or another, was a dilemma with which many men were faced.

Hamlet is a man adrift from old faiths and not yet anchored in new; a man of his time in that, more particularly. The theologians had been busy, patching and re-patching. But formulas, which the mind may accept, are one thing; and the lively faith, by which we live in unconscious harmony with our surroundings, is very much another. This faith extends to secular everyday things. Let it be flawed here and there, it will be weakened everywhere. Put it then to some extraordinary test and we at once find that its integrity is broken. Reason, brought to the rescue, cannot help, for it works by other means; it cannot even tell us what is wrong. Act we must, if action is what is asked of us, for the world will not stand still. But with crippled faith and enfranchised reason at odds in us we do self-defeating things, and may lapse into impotence and despair. That is Hamlet's case. And while none of those first spectators may have stood, as he did, with

a father killed, a mother stained . . .

and under ghostly command to avenge the crime, not a few of them must have seen in his spiritual troubles only a more vivid shadowing forth of their own.

He is of an intellectual generation to whom the word has been let penetrate: Prove all things; for only so can one learn to hold fast that which is good. Could he simply have been set to prove the theory of a carefully selected few— he and his fellow-student Horatio—in the shelter of that Protestant Wittenberg to which he so longed

H A M L E T

to return, all might have been well. But he has to face an urgent, practical problem, which is coloured for him, moreover, by his own most intimate concern with it. How can a man treat such a matter dispassionately and trust to his own isolated judgment of the right and the wrong of it? And if it is a question, as this is, of life and death, and even worse, of salvation or damnation—let him go arguing such issues as these forth and back and back and forth again in terms of his own doubts and griefs and fears, into what dark and vertiginous places may not the lonely mind be lured?

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That beetles o'er his base into the sea,
And there assume some other horrible form,
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
And draw you into madness?

Such is Horatio's poetic picture of what does, in fact, occur

Some men manage, seemingly, to reduce these high issues to their own measure, and will emerge from such an ordeal with their God in their pocket, as it were, justifying whatever they may now choose to do. Some will stay lost in the moral anarchy, which is all they have found. Many retreat baffled from the adventure, and the readier to act thereafter as habit or authority or the formulas of their dead faith dictate. Many a man, then, can find touches of himself in the later Hamlet at least, who returns weary of questioning, hardened (by a sea-fight and some ruthless practice upon his gaolers) to his deadly task, and looking back to the old self-torture as 'madness.'

Yet his soul's adventure, which seemed but to

THE CHARACTERS

lead him to defeat, was heroic too. For if men shirk such perils, how are these high matters to be brought home to spiritual freedmen? Nor will mere intellectual venturing suffice, if lively faith, in its health and strength, is to be found and enjoyed again. Hamlet, being called upon, flings his whole being—mind and affections both—the best and the worst of him—weakness no less than strength—into the trial. And he widens the issue till he sees eternal life and death, his own and his enemy's, at stake. He will reconcile himself, as he is and in all he is, with these now unveiled verities of this world and the next of that may be. In which Promethean struggle towards the light he is beaten—as who has not been?—with havoc wrought, not in him only, but by him, even to his own depute. It is none the less a heroic struggle.

Here for me is the master-stroke to Hamlet's 'mystery.' The same world around him has naturally no case in it, nor the too sane spectator of the play. He does not pluck out the heart of it himself. Neither are we meant to let his trouble's rooted in the fact that it is a mystery. Shakespeare, for his part, must order his play in terms of a fiction (even a Hamlet is called on to act); the tragedy of thwarted thought and tortured spirit is the rich soil in which he re-plants his borrowings. Yet while the action keeps us interested, it is this tragedy and the mystery of it, which is enthralling.

If we are at one with Polonius in thinking that

to expostulate

What majesty should be, what duty is,
Why day is day, night night, and time is time,
Were nothing but to waste night, day and time

H A M L E T

and that, as to Hamlet,

to define true madness

What is 't but to be nothing else but mad?

why, Shakespeare will not, so to say, have spoilt our Kyd for us. The play is attractively alive on the surface; the riches of its underworkings of emotion and thought fall to those whose own are a touchstone for them. And it fulfils, in this, the double demand of drama, which is not for action alone nor the revelation of character only, but for character in action. Pertinently so; since the character-revealing problems of life present themselves as problems of action, which men attack even as Hamlet does, imaginatively, thoughtfully, passionately too. And the play's progress, like a stream in flood, here flowing deeply and evenly, here eddying and spreading, there rushing down some steep channel - it is thus, and not to any clock-like measure, that human affairs do move.

In England, for the best part of a century before *Hamlet* was written, and for sixty years after, the finer issues of the spiritual revolution which the Renaissance had begun were obscured by secular discord, persecution, and civil war; and the ensuing peace left them hardened into formula. To the popular mind thus distressed and coarsened the finer issues implicit either in play or character might well make small appeal. Nor would they be likelier to touch the conscience of the positive eighteenth century.¹ Not till it was waning, and

¹ See Johnson's note to the play. He praises the conduct and, in particular, the 'variety' of the action. But 'of the feigned madness of Hamlet there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not have done with the reputation of sanity.'

THE CHARACTERS

many men had come to find their set creeds unsatisfying, till they began to ask the old essential questions once again, to have a better answer if they might, did the Hamlet of spiritual tragedy come by his own; then to become, indeed, the typical hero of a new 'age of doubt.' It was as if Shakespeare, so alive to the spirit of his own time, had been in this mysteriously attuned besides to some

prophetic soul

Of the wide world dreaming on things to come.

While our age of doubt endures, and men still cry despairingly 'I do not know . . .' and must go on un comforted, the play will keep, I should suppose, its hold on us. If a new age of faith or reason should succeed, or one for a while too crushed by brute reality to value either, Hamlet may then be seen again simply as the good Polonius saw him.